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JULY 1985

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for "The Lord of the Skies"

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opinion

Robert Silverberg

During the fall and winter of 1982-83, somewhere between half and three-quarters of the books on the hardcover best-seller list in the United States were science fiction.

The impact of that sentence on anyone who, like me, has been closely associated with science fiction for a generation or more, is almost impossible to communicate to an outsider. I grew up in a world where science-fiction magazines were sleazy-looking magazines that you wouldn't want your friends to see you buying; where it was possible to keep a complete collection of science-fiction paperbacks in one shoebox; where libraries, if they bought the few SF hardcover books that were published, stashed them next to the westerns and listed them in the card catalog as "pseudoscientific literature." That was the state of the art, circa 1949. Things changed greatly, of course, after science fiction became an important part of mass-market paperback publishing in the 1950s, after the hardcover publishers began doing serious SF programs in the late 1960s, and after the success of "Star Trek" on television and *2001: A Space Odyssey* in the movies demonstrated that non-dumb SF

could have vast commercial appeal beyond the established hard-core audience. But still —

Here we have James Michener's *Space* sitting on the top of the list for months. It's not exactly science fiction of the Heinlein/Asimov/Clarke breed; but it's not that far removed; and the only thing that makes us hesitate to claim it as true SF is that it reads more like historical fiction, albeit historical fiction of the very near future. Right behind it is Clarke's *2010* — the genuine item, no doubt of it — and then Asimov's *Foundation's Edge*, equally simon-pure SF. Elsewhere on the list we find Jean Auel's *Valley of Horses*, a tale of Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons that certainly qualifies for our field, and William Kotzwinkle's *E.T. Storybook*, and the latest in Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series. There's also Stephen King's *Different Seasons*, which isn't science fiction at all, but King operates in a closely related field and is no stranger to the science-fictional way of thinking. Counting his book, that's seven out of ten — barely leaving room for the latest Judith Krantz or Sidney Sheldon to squeeze onto the list, and push-

ing a lot of best-seller perennials like Robert Ludlum, Len Deighton, and Kurt Vonnegut into the lower reaches.

What's going on?

Why is science fiction suddenly the dominant factor in the publishing industry — not merely a big item, but the hottest thing around?

Each of those best-sellers can be provided with a special explanation to account for its success. *The E. T. Storybook*, of course, is riding along in the wake of a vastly successful motion picture. To some degree, so is *2010*. *Space* bears the Michener name, and he is so formidably popular a writer that he would probably have reached the top of the list even if he had chosen to offer a book of sonnets. Ditto King. Asimov, though he has no Hollywood push behind him and has not previously been in bestseller territory, is a familiar public figure, the basic SF household name. Jean Auel's prehistoric book, sequel to an earlier bestseller of similar nature, combines genuine SF thinking with the apparatus of the woman's saga novel in an irresistibly commercial way. And Douglas Adams's book is a spoof, a lark; that sort of stuff, done as well as this, has always enjoyed big sales regardless of the subject being spoofed.

And yet, and yet — Heinlein's *Friday* was on the best-seller list last year. The last two segments of Frank Herbert's *Dune* series have had astonishing sales. Stephen Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant* books, likewise. Anne McCaffrey

has had her dragon books on the list. There have been some others. In all those cases, the traditional techniques of book promotion were employed to build and sustain sales, but it's impossible to credit the success of those titles to Hollywood associations, TV appearances, or other peripheral advantages. They were true science-fiction books of the sort that might have been serialized in the SF magazines of my boyhood and then might have gone on to sell ninety thousand copies, or so, in paperback, at 35¢ apiece; and instead, priced as \$15 hardcovers, they reached hundreds of thousands of readers, and millions more in paperback.

The explanation, I think, grows out of the great social upheaval that we conveniently label "the Sixties," though the peak of it actually fell between 1967 and 1972. In that time, basic political structures in the United States and other western industrial nations began coming apart; new styles of music, sexual behavior, dress, and physical appearance were adopted; the use of mind-altering drugs other than alcohol became commonplace; there was intense interest in mysticism, Oriental religion, and other intellectual disciplines not previously pursued here. And science fiction became intensely popular. Such books as *Dune* and *Stranger in a Strange Land* and Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* became virtual handbooks of behavioral guidance for the millions who, in that dark and unstable time, found themselves venturing into all that unfamiliar

territory. The torrent of SF paperbacks that still washes through our bookstores began to flow at that time.

Paperbacks, because most of the social astronauts of the Sixties were 17 to 25 years old. Not only did they necessarily live on paperback-sized budgets, but they came to regard hardcover books, I think, as symbols of the repressive, stuffy, and obsolete older generation against whom they were in rebellion. Because there were so many in that age group — millions upon millions, the celebrated Baby Boom kids of the postwar era — they came to exert an immense demographic impact on all forms of popular consumption.

And now it is fifteen years or so later. Once again we are in a time of troubles — economic chaos, primarily, much of it the result, ironically, of the very solutions we applied to the problems of that earlier troubled era. The Baby Boom people are still around — but now they are 30, 35, 38 years old. Science fiction still speaks to them; it offers, as ever, insight or at least the illusion of insight into what may lie beyond this immediate moment of

pain and confusion. But they are no longer a paperback generation. They can afford hardcover books; having waited this long to find out where Asimov's Foundation was heading, they are unwilling to wait another year for the paperback, when \$14.95 gives the answer this afternoon. Instant gratification was always important to the people of the Sixties. I think there are a great many reasons why dislocated times send people to read science fiction; but to explain the topheavy presence of SF on the hardcover bestseller list, I invite you to consider once more the power of the Baby Boom as it makes its steamroller way through our society. When they manifest their tastes, as they often do, *en masse*, entire industries pay heed. But I wonder: are we heading for an era, a decade or two hence, when science fiction, our soaring and mind-expanding literature, is a musty and ritualized entertainment consumed only by elderly Baby Boomers, hearkening back nostalgically to the good old days of their twenties, while the illiterate young 'uns divert themselves with the electronic hardware that science fiction predicted?



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March 1981 is sold out!

May 1981. "The Vampire of Mallworld" by Somtow Sucharitkul; George R.R. Martin, Lisa Tuttle, Gregory Benford, Marvin Kaye.

July 1981 is sold out!

September 1981. Roger Zelazny, Ron Goulart, Bill Pronzini, Harlan Ellison, Barry Malzberg; Gene Wolfe interview.

November 1981. "The Last Line of the Haiku" by Somtow Sucharitkul; Marvin Kaye, Parke Godwin, Jack Wodhams, Orson Scott Card; Algis Budrys interview.

January 1982. "Unsound Variations" by George R.R. Martin; Theodore Sturgeon, Manly Wade Wellman; Lloyd Biggle interview.

March 1982. "The Cheese Stands Alone" by Harlan Ellison; "Moon of Ice" by Brad Linaweaver; Barry Malzberg; A.E. van Vogt interview.

June 1982. "The Story of a Dadar" by Darrell Schweitzer; Charles L. Grant, David Bunch, Wayne Wightman; Asimov classic reprint; Grant interview.

September 1982. Marvin Kaye, Parke Godwin, Alan Ryan, David Bunch, George Alec Effinger; Michael Shaara interview.

November 1982. The first Scithers issue! Michael Whelan cover. Long fiction by Jack Williamson, Larry Niven, Robert Silverberg; short stories by Gene Wolfe, John M. Ford, Nancy Springer; Silverberg's "Opinion"; Ford's games column.

January 1983. Kelly Freas cover; "Aquila Meets Bigfoot" by Somtow Sucharitkul; novelet by Poul Anderson; stories by Tanith Lee, Jack C. Haldeman, Michael McCollum, etc.; Avram Davidson Adventures in Unhistory; Silverberg.

March 1983. Jack Gaughan cover; part I of *Against Infinity* by Gregory Benford; Bill Pronzini, Darrell Schweitzer, Sharon Webb, Damien Broderick; poetry by Thomas Disch; "The Amazing Years" by Cele Goldsmith Lalli; A. Bertram Chandler interview.

May 1983. Kelly Freas cover; *Against Infinity* by Gregory Benford concluded; "Aquila: The Final Conflict" by Somtow Sucharitkul; Gene Wolfe, Alan Dean Foster, William Wu; features by Silverberg, Ford, Catalano, Coulson.

Fantastic:

January 1980. "The Cliffhanger Sound" by Paul Dellinger; "Never Argue With Antique Dealers" by Darrell Schweitzer; a classic reprint by Murray Leinster; analysis of TV adaptations of Ray Bradbury.

April and July 1980 are sold out!

October 1980. "The Amorous Umbrella" by Marvin Kaye; Darrell Schweitzer, Wayne Wightman, Tom Easton, M. Lindholm.

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The Mists of Avalon

by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Knopf, \$16.95 (cloth)

This interpretation of the Arthurian myth should be one of the most important fantasy novels of the 1980s. The book is another attempt to rationalize the myth, and a more successful one than most. It seems to be about half Malory and half Marion; one of my friends commented that it seemed a lot like *Darkover*, which isn't surprising when one considers that the two societies are somewhat similar to begin with. Many of the changes from Malory's version were originated by Arthurian scholars attempting to reconcile discrepancies in the myth (the Camelot Court Irregulars?), but I suspect that some of them originate with Marion. In this version, King Arthur is caught in the middle of a conflict between the Mother-Goddess religion, represented by his sister Morgan le Fay (called Morgaine here), and early Christianity represented by his wife Guinevere (or Gwenhwyfar in this book). Marion seems to have something of a grudge against Gwenhwyfar. Of course, if Morgaine is the hero, Gwen more or less has to be the villain. However, one of the themes of the book is the similarity between the two women; especially the increasing religious fanaticism of both as they get older. Gwen's pettiness tends to blur the theme a trifle. It's a marvelous portrait, though; I wonder if it doesn't draw on some of Marion's experience as a small-town Texas housewife? Of course, Christianity wins — largely because both Morgaine and her aunt and mentor

Viviane seem rather inept. Leaders of a religion based on emotion, they never make any allowances for other people's emotions upsetting their plans. Emotions, of course, are at the heart of the book. I would prefer a version in which fewer people express passionate despair over hopeless loves, but I suppose if you have a classic tragedy you have to have classic emotions — even if it strikes me as more idiotic than tragic to have one's passion kindled by the mere touch of a man who you know, logically, isn't all that great. Still, it's a much more plausible story than the original. I can complain about minor points, but the book as a whole is tremendous. And I can compliment one minor point: the dust jacket by Braldt Bralds is outstanding.

The Idylls of the Queen

by Phyllis Ann Karr

Ace, \$2.95 (paper)

A totally different look at Arthur's court. Phyllis takes one specific incident from Malory — the poisoning of Sir Patrise — and makes it into an Arthurian murder mystery. Characters and setting remain mostly true to the original; the greatest variation comes in making the detective and protagonist Sir Kay the Seneschal, and having Sir Mordred play Dr. Watson's part. It's an interesting idea, and Kay's pungent comments on the other members of the Round Table make it an amusing book that's well worth your while. None of the scope or seriousness of Marion's work, but a sharp look at one specific detail of the legend.

Wall Around A Star

by Frederik Pohl and Jack Williamson
Del Rey, \$2.95 (paper)

This is a sequel to *Farthest Star*, which I haven't read, but it's intelligible enough on its own. Basically, this is space-opera of the Doc Smith school: a grand galactic furor over a mysterious spaceship-world hundreds of times the size of Earth. Characterization is not just cardboard, it's non-existent. The characters are mouthpieces for colossal concepts and interstellar engineering, and either the reader is swept along by the magnificent ideas or there isn't much there for him. There wasn't much for me, but then I was never a fan of either Doc or George O. Smith. If you've been longing for the Good Old Days, here they are, updated with the latest extrapolations.

The Eye of the Heron

by Ursula K. Le Guin
Harper & Row, \$11.95 (cloth)

This short novel was originally published in the anthology *Millennial Women*; it deserved to be in a book by itself, and now it is. It concerns a community of pacifists in crisis. The characters stand out as very real, though I wonder a bit about their genetics. Unless Le Guin is postulating that pacifism is inheritable, I can't see her community lasting past the first generation without spawning some aggressive types. I do thoroughly agree with what seems to be one of the main points of the book; that when faced with violence, the pacifist must in the end choose among submitting, running away, or betraying his/her own principles by fighting back. Le Guin's largely-unexplored world provides more incentive for running away than ours does, but she can't quite make the retreat into a triumph of the spirit. Eventually that world will fill up as

ours has, and there will be no place left to run. A very well-written tragedy.

The Unbeheaded King

by L. Sprague de Camp
Del Rey, \$9.95 (cloth)

The final book of a trilogy which includes *The Goblin Tower* and *The Clocks of Iraz*. As this book opens, King Jorian, a former clockmaker and itinerant poet, is still on the run from his former subjects, who wish to behead him according to custom. At the same time, he wants to extract his favorite wife from his residence in the palace dungeons. He makes several attempts by stealth and sorcery and eventually succeeds, only to discover that she's not all that happy to be extracted. De Camp's characters are all humorously realistic; I think I've met a few of them. It's a fine, lighthearted adventure; reads very fast (partly because it's not very long); and contains some interesting concepts including the idea that Jorian's "afterworld" is our own mundane/mechanical society. It explains why he's so determined to keep his head; after all, would *you* be willing to die if you were going to have to spend eternity in Philadelphia? Recommended highly.

Aurelia

by R.A. Lafferty
Starblaze, \$5.95 (paper)

Lafferty's previous books have tended to include allusions which were understood only by Catholic scholars. He seems to be trying for more plain speaking; in this parody/parable of the Coming, the allusions are broader and the comments much more blunt. The book contains less good-humored zaniness and more sarcastic commentary on modern art, literature, music, politics, psychology, society and religion. He doesn't like any of them. Since I

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don't, either, I enjoyed the book, though I don't think it's quite as good as usual. Anything by Lafferty is well worth reading — and thinking about.

Hal Clement: Starmont Reader's Guide 11

by Donald M. Hassler

Starmont House, \$4.95 (paper)

There is a whole series of these Starmont Guides. Producing critiques of science fiction authors has become a major academic industry, with at least four publishers that I know about and probably more than I don't. I picked the Clement guide because I'm reasonably well acquainted with Clement and his work, but there are lots more to choose from. Hassler comes across as somewhat smug, patronizing, having little knowledge of science fiction or physics, and a poor writer even for an academic. But he's done his homework, and his theories about Clement's work are all at least tenable; I find the psychological implications overworked, but I'm sure they'll fit into a college literature course. Not precisely a good guide, but an acceptable one.

Fifty Extremely SF Stories

ed. by Michael Bastraw

Niekas Publications, 106F School St., Laconia, NH 03246, \$4.70 (paper)

SF in this case stands for Short Fiction as well as Science Fiction. Each story is fifty words or less in length. Since vignettes are the hardest things in the world to write well, the results aren't generally inspiring, but they are unusual. Fans of authors such as John Brunner, Piers Anthony, F. M. Busby, Spider Robinson, Fred Saberhagen, Brian Aldiss, Susan Schwartz, etc., may want to pick this up to see an unusual — and unlikely to be reprinted — story by their favorite. There is also an assortment of fan authors who may be tomorrow's pros.

Would-be writers might like to see how much — or how little — can be done in such a restricted form. It's not exactly good, but it's interesting.

The Umbral Anthology of Science Fiction Poetry

ed. by Steve Rasnic Tem

Umbral Press, \$4.50 (paper)

I'm prejudiced against this one because I don't like much modern poetry anyway; but for those who do, here's a science-fictional volume of it. The poets are, according to the introduction, after Vision. (They can have it, for all I care; I never saw a Vision I'd fight for.) Out of a couple of hundred or so poems, I was rather amused by David Bunch's entry and actually enjoyed Marge Piercy's contribution; since she's a big-name feminist she's allowed to be whimsical instead of Visionary. Otherwise, if you like intense, mystical, and somewhat pompous verse, here it is. (Well, to be fair, it's not all mystical; some of it is just short fiction with funny line-spacing.) Anyone who enjoys both science fiction and modern verse should appreciate it.

Myth Directions

by Robert Asprin

Starblaze, \$5.95

Third book in the adventures of Skeeve the apprentice magician and his partner and mentor Aahz the demon. I thought the first book was the best thing I'd seen in this sort of humorous fantasy since *Unknown Worlds* folded. This one isn't quite as good; like most series, it's gone downhill slightly as it progressed. But it's quite amusing enough to be worth your while, as Skeeve and company manage to mislay a friend and become involved in an extremely odd sporting event in the process of getting her back. Not at all serious or worthwhile literature, but fun.

Last fall, I had the good fortune to sit on a couple of panels at a couple of science-fiction conventions with the likes of Ed Bryant, Steve Perry, Robert Silverberg, M. K. Wren and Gene Van Troyer. Even though the panels and conventions were several months apart, the subject matter was the same: what *is* science fiction?

And most of the aforementioned panelists agreed: science fiction is as much a marketing category as it is a literary *genre*.

In other words, it's not just the writer who tells you a book is SF (or fantasy, or horror, or whatever), it's the publisher as well; and the publisher's opinion counts a whole lot more in the marketplace than the writer's.

That's not saying that this is something awful. When a publisher labels a book SF, it more or less guarantees that a certain number of people will look at it, and a certain number will buy it, based on how it's labelled. If a lot of these books were labelled "mainstream" fiction, odds are they'd drop into an abyss before anyone would realize that they were even out there.

Those writers who want to break out of the SF *genre*, — or as some call it, the SF ghetto, — don't necessarily want to give up writing the type of stuff they've been writing. They just may not feel the label put on it is appropriate, or they may simply want more money for the book than they'd get if it were labelled as "just" science fiction.

If the bestseller lists are any indication, some writers have broken out, and done quite well in the process, if breaking out means reaching more of a "mainstream" audience versus a "science fiction" one.

Despite the success of the few, I don't think you can foresee an end for the name of SF, or of any other successful category, in publishing circles. The categories may be limiting to some, but they also provide a safety net: helping hook readers up with writers they may not know about, providing a guarantee for publishers, and giving some writers a place to initially hang their literary hats before they hit the bestseller lists and no longer need a *genre*.

The Void Captain's Tale

by Norman Spinrad

Timescape: \$13.95 (cloth)

One writer who has broken through at least some of the barriers that categories pose is Norman Spinrad. In *The Void Captain's Tale*, Spinrad takes a space-opera idea and turns it into science-fiction/philosophy, a love story, and a character study.

The Void Captain's Tale's plot holds no real surprises; at the beginning you're told flat-out how it's going to end, with the Void Ship *Dragon Zephyr* marooned in space without a Void Pilot. But the story isn't as much about how the events carry you to that point, but about the changes wrought in the man who was one of the two people responsible for taking it there: Void Captain Genro Kane Gupta.

For, you see, a Void Ship is unlike 99 percent of all the other "hyperspace"-class ships in science fiction. The interstellar drive that propels it comes from an extinct alien race and requires a human man (the Void Captain) to control it, and a human woman (the Void Pilot) to actually be in the circuit herself to activate the Jump. In this spe-

cific case, the Pilot is a woman who is obsessed with what Pilots call the "Great and Only" — that period of instantaneous and seemingly infinite time in which they are responsible for making the Jump into hyperspace and out again. Pilots consider this akin to a religious experience, and one specific Pilot, the one travelling with Gupta, is unlike other Pilots: she is not anti-social, and draws Gupta into her plans to send herself into the "Great and Only" forever.

So this book is not your typical science-fiction adventure. It is an adventure, but a thoughtful one, with excellently-drawn characters. You can easily believe after reading it how Gupta, a man of duty, can turn himself into a willing co-conspirator with the Pilot. It also takes a look at something Spinrad seems to enjoy examining: the nature of reality, and of those who crave it and fear it. Another thing it has that you wouldn't have seen on *Space Patrol* is a healthy dose of sex. But it is required for the story, especially when you realize the function the Pilot plays in the Jump circuit, which I'll leave to your imagination if you don't plan to read the book.

The Void Captain's Tale is one of that rare breed, a thoughtful SF adventure novel that *works*. It sometimes is not easy reading, but never does the introspection of Gupta grind the narrative to a halt. Spinrad's book is hard to classify; but if you like philosophical meat with your SF potatoes, it's worth a bite.

The Dreamstone

by C. J. Cherryh

DAW: \$2.75 (paper)

From a writer known for her Hugo-award winning SF adventure, we get a fantasy. But *The Dreamstone* by C. J. Cherryh doesn't read like a novel. It

reads more like two novellas strung together, with the only connecting tissue being the last of the Elven folk, Arafel, who rules the ancient, legendary forest Ealdwood with the help of her dreamstone.

The book doesn't pull off the feeling of epic confrontation its ad campaign has worked up for it: "the last defense of fairyland against the encroaching iron sword of mankind," as the copywriters put it. *The Dreamstone* is an expansion of the work "Ealdwood." Even though I haven't read the story in its original incarnation, I'd be willing to bet it and the first half of the novel are the best parts of what became *The Dreamstone*. It's the first half, dealing with a hidden valley visible only to those who need it, that holds the most promise. The continuing plot thread, that of a man who awaits the rise of an infant King to reunite the land, is old hat in fantasy circles, and Cherryh just can't seem to breathe any new life into it. She does make an attempt by tying the infant-King plot in with the fortunes of Ealdwood.

But the second half of the book pretty much turns into an exercise in battles-and-beasties fantasy. There is the hard-to-believe introduction of Death as a character, and a climactic battle including Elven folk and Death and humans; but nothing about it encourages the "wow" response of an epic confrontation. It all comes across as routine, and there's nothing epic about that.

Wintermind

by Marvin Kaye and Parke Godwin

Doubleday: \$15.95 (cloth)

Fans of *The Masters of Solitude* probably wondered, back in 1978, if there'd ever be a sequel to that book. Well, with the SF publishing industry's current love affair with the trilogy

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in full bloom, there's not only a sequel, but *two* sequels in the offing in what's now being called the *SOLITUDE TRILOGY*. *Wintermind* is the first of the sequels, and it was worth the wait.

Wintermind opens up a decade after *The Masters of Solitude* ended. It's a far-future America, where a high-tech City exists on the East Coast; and outside it, members of the telepathic and Earth-Goddess-worshipping Coven live. The two societies are now starting to intermingle after the defenses of the City were let down. Specifically, this volume deals with the first Covenanters to live in the City, the development of a young doctor neither Coven nor City, a marauding band of killers; and then it ties them all in with the legendary *Wintermind*, a murderous something feared by those who live near the sea.

Kaye and Godwin's characters are believable people, and the process of intermingling characters and lives is realistically handled. Handled so well, in fact, that it's a book that's hard to put down, because you want to find out what happens to them. And the plot is tied together with great imagination and logic. It has an independent story that is unique to and complete in the volume, but also sets up a good unanswered question or two.

Wintermind is what a book in a trilogy should be. I didn't read the first volume, yet enjoyed this one . . . and I'm looking forward to the third.

The Wind from a Burning Woman
by Greg Bear

Arkham House: \$13.95 (cloth)

Red As Blood

by Tanith Lee

DAW: \$2.50 (paper)

Time now to trot out the handy Satisfaction Index (number of memorable stories/total number of stories) and check out a couple of collections,

both of which, generally speaking, are worthwhile.

The first of the pair garners an SI of 83%. *The Wind from a Burning Woman* by Greg Bear has all the marks of careful editing and weeding-out, and the stories that remain are inventive and well thought-out. They run the gamut from hard SF to fantasy. And both kinds are handled well. All of the stories are likely to be familiar to regular SF readers, especially "Mandala," part of his 1981 novel *Strength of Stones*, and the bizarrely attractive "Petra," which appeared in *Omni* and concerns a time in Man's future when stone figures and other products of Man's imagination come to life.

Another nice thing about the book is its simple, very appropriate, very evocative illustrations by Dennis Neal Smith. And the quality of the actual book itself is a pleasure, when you consider most other publishers can't touch that kind of a product for the same price. *The Wind from a Burning Woman* is a collection of a half-dozen stories well worth the price.

Also worthwhile, with an SI of 77%, is Tanith Lee's *Red As Blood*. Subtitled *Tales from the Sisters Grimmer*, *Red As Blood* contains nine tales, mostly fantasy, that re-tell some famous fairy tales from decidedly different points of view. Almost all the tales are successful in their re-tellings, with the exception of "Beauty." This reworking of "Beauty and the Beast" is the only story in the book that's science fiction, but it's also the weakest, likely because it tries to explain too much to justify a science fiction context.

A couple of the tales I couldn't recognize as far as what the original fairy tale was that inspired Lee; but even in those, there are elements that strike responsive chords in memory: somehow, this *is* familiar.

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For lack of a better phrase, I will say that Lee writes in lyrical prose that sparkles with clarity, making it easy to read. More fantasy writers should do as good a job of interweaving background into the narrative. As with all good magic tricks and good writing, Lee's work appears effortless when it's the best. In *Red As Blood*, it appears effortless quite often.

The Hanging Stones

by Manly Wade Wellman

Doubleday: \$11.95 (cloth)

The Hanging Stones is another book that appears effortless, but in this case, it's as though not much effort has been put into it. *The Hanging Stones* is the fourth novel in the Silver John series, and to its credit, the book does stand on its own. Unfortunately, the plot is so thin, it would have made a better novelet than novel.

Briefly, the plot is one of Silver John, a mountain balladeer who is sensitive to the supernatural, who gets caught up in a plan to build a New Stonehenge. But those building the new monument run into opposition from a group that used to use the area for worship, a group of werewolves, and others.

Making a book like this work requires an especially good job of getting the reader to at least accept the meshing of the everyday real world with the supernatural; here, it doesn't ring true. Add to that one-dimensional characters (the Ruthless Business Tycoon; the Brilliant Good Ol' Boy; the Plucky Girl) you can't feel anything for and a narrative style that's so folksy it drops into cutesy at times, and you have a

book that isn't worth picking up except by the most diehard Wellman fan.

Vision of the Future

by Ben Bova

Abrams: \$25.00 (cloth)

This is a book to adorn any coffee table. *Vision of the Future* is subtitled *The Art of Robert McCall*. McCall is a man whose name you may not recognize, but whose paintings you likely would — of space and the space program. They've graced U.S. postage stamps, and the posters for the film *2001*.

There are plenty of those paintings in this book, over 200, with 75 in full color. They include his work for stamps, posters, SF movie preproduction art (*Star Trek*, *The Black Hole*, and more) and wall-sized space murals. Visually, it's a gem.

The text is by Bova, and while it does cover aspects of McCall's career as an illustrator, it's also a brief history of and look ahead at the future of the U.S. space effort, peppered with strong pro-space commentary. It is, for all intents and purposes, another place for SF writer and former *Omni*-executive-editor Bova to continue to lobby for increased space program spending. Personally, I would have preferred more information on McCall's involvement in film. However, unlike some efforts in the past, Bova might have an avenue here to preach not to the converted only.

All that aside, it's a good art book, with the text informative to a point (that being the point all art books are limited to by their very nature). It should please fans of space art. ☺

Dear George, Darrell John Meg Mark & Dainis,

Congratulations on the great beginning with *Amazing*. My subscription copy of the January '83 issue has arrived, and I found myself reading it cover to cover. Allow me to explain how unusual that is. My job entails a lot of reading, and these days I am so overwhelmed that I don't read anything cover to cover! I subscribe to three of your competitors, including that "other magazine" George used to work for. I still read & enjoy them, but I haven't sat down and devoured one, as I did this issue, in a long time.

A few specific comments: I did not like the "Mallworld" series by Sucharitkul in *IA'sfm*. The Aquila series, especially the latest installment, has made me resolve to give the man another chance and go back & read some of his earlier stuff again; I look forward eagerly to new material by him. In a similar fashion, I now intend to buy some of Tanith Lee's other pieces. I have consistently neglected them in the bookstores. There is so much junk in the science-fiction section of most stores that I sort through the chaff looking for authors that I recognize, or look now and then for a new author whose book carries blurbs by authors that I like. The recognition factor in book and magazine sales is one that I am sure you are well aware of. I just want to make the point that I, for one, appreciate your specific efforts to encourage new names.

I thought the translated piece by Hamura Ryo was an interesting counterpoint to the distinctly American (or at least Western) science fiction we usually see. I would like to see more such pieces from time to time.

I like the mix of artwork. I recognize that it probably costs you just as much as the fiction does, but it adds to the impact of the stories, in my opinion.

Of your two reviewers, I like Coulson much more than Catalano. It might be more accurate to say I share his biases more than I do Catalano's.

I am not sure how you did it, but you avoided the pitfall of simply being another version of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. You seem to have managed to maintain the best of the *Amazing* heritage, infused with the lessons learned by *IA'sfm*. My only real complaint is that I intensely dislike the term "scientifictional" and all its permutations. The only related term I like less is "sci-fi." Even Gernsback had his off days.

Have you considered a "Speculations" column, wherein the author engages in deliberate hyperbole or extrapolation? I would enjoy another good science column; I think the Good Doctor has monopolized the field long enough. From the popularity of *Discover* and *Science* 82, I would guess that the column has a potential readership. I also suggest that you consider a readership poll, to determine the type of readers you now have, their likes & dislikes, and so on.

Good luck.

Sincerely,

Michael J. White
Warminster PA

Actually, the interior artwork costs about 25% of what the text being illustrated costs us.

As the 13th editor of this magazine, I have a lot of tradition to live with. Specifically: this magazine uses — has used — will use fantasy a lot more freely than

either Analog or Asimov's. We're open to good swordplay& sorcery — which is awfully hard to write well and dreadfully easy to write badly. We'll use a serial when we feel our readers will like one, though our current bi-monthly schedule does present problems for works which must run in more than two installments. And by using far fewer horrid puns than we did at our previous chair, those that we do slip in will be all that much more horrid when they hit.

A problem with any reader poll — and the letter column is one such — is that it over-represents the feelings of those of you who feel very strongly, those of you who write letters or respond to written polls.

The biggest challenge to any science-fiction magazine editor: how to reach the millions of people who saw and enjoyed the two Star Wars movies, but who do not yet read science fiction magazines — who, in fact, are barely aware that these magazines even exist.

— Editor

Dear Mr. Scithers,

My compliments to you and to the writer of "Aquila Meets Bigfoot."

I am a Roman. Born in Rome. Background of Latin & ancient Roman history, from birth.

It has been a long time since I distinctly enjoyed a sci-fi tale as much as I did this one!

Montes Saxosi indeed! Quoiotulus! And the clever plot and subplots — the intermingling of fantasy and reality.

I did something I haven't done in some time — read through the entire story. Laughed. Enjoyed. . . .

Congratulations! Thanks to you, sci-fi is making an "Amazing" recovery.

Silvana C. Attura
Washington, DC

Dear George,

So Time Travel does happen! I was amazed to find in my mailbox this morning a complimentary copy of the March 1983 *Amazing* — and here I am still in 1982. . . .

I wondered what I had done to deserve such a gift and then found the Darrell Schweitzer interview with A. Bertram Chandler. It was quite a good one, but it would have been better if I'd been sent a proof copy for me to correct before publication.

One trouble with me — as both Japanese and German translators, among others have complained — is that I am trilingual. Australian, English and Navalese. At times, as during an interview, my Australian accent tends to become somewhat heavy. And I assume that the interviewer is as familiar with British naval usage as I am myself.

For example, on Page 78, lines 3 & 4: "a Lt. Commander in one service, two and a half rungs up . . ." This should be, "a Lt. Commander in one service, two and a half rings up." In the British sea services an officer's sleeve braid is referred to as "rings", not "stripes." If an officer has two and a half rings on his sleeve — i.e. one ¼" ring between two ½" rings — he is said to have two and a half rings up. (Oddly enough he could be said to be two and a half rungs up the ladder of promotion, which is probably where the confusion crept in.)

On pages 77 and 79 my English/Australian pronunciation of a certain word was changed by giving it the American spelling, which I have always disliked. As far as I'm concerned, an "ass" is something that you ride on, an "arse" is something that you sit on or get a pain in.

On page 80 there is an annoying misprint. With reference to my Ned Kelly novel (hopefully to be published next year by Penguin if Penguin's edi-

tor and I get our differences ironed out by then), I said, "I shall change the course of history." It appears as, "I shan't change the course of history." On the same page I make reference to my favourite seamen, the first of whom is Matthew Flinders. He has suffered a sea change to Matthew Benders.

On page 81 a completely unnecessary "also" has crept in. The sentence in question should read, "This dedication led to a sharp increase of his sales in Japan." I claim no credit for Forester's popularity in other parts of the world.

It could be, of course, that backward Time Travel plays havoc with the printed word. . . .

Anyhow, thank you very much for the advance copy. And I take this opportunity to wish you and all the others at *Amazing* all the very best for 1983, even though you are, apparently, already at least two months into it.

Further on the subject of "favourite seamen . . ." I referred to James Clavell's Pilot Major Blackthorn. You have the rank as Major — which is not the same animal at all.

Sincerely,

A. Bertram Chandler
Australia

Dear Mr. Scithers:

I picked up your January 1983 issue in a store this week and just finished reading it.

As a reader of *Amazing* since the thirties, off and on (sometimes the "off" periods were pretty bad), I now appreciate very much the quality of what you are doing. Very likely you are doing it by offering better payments to the authors, which takes time to pay off because a new audience must be attracted to the better stories. How are they to find out that you are better now? And can you keep it up? I guess

this is a question of the staying power of TSR.

And to see good ole Freas on the cover! How his work takes me back.

Davidson's article was, as they always are, fine; but I am still trying to figure out that "Canadian musket lands." If you had not specifically stated that proofreading was now being taken care of in an unfailing way, I might suspect it was supposed to be "muskeg" but of course it was not.

I always enjoy stories based on different time tracks, and "Aquila meets Bigfoot" contains enough GOOD wit to salt & pepper well, but somehow I get irritated to see Somtow all the time. Some other magazine used to have him at least once in every issue. Can't he use a pen name in the name of decency, so I won't realize it's the same damn person all the time? You will now probably accuse me of being anti-Siamitic. That's such a ridiculous accusation.

Sincerely,

Rinchart S. Potts
Glassboro NJ

Alas, we fear that our hubris angered the gods of typography. From now on, Amazing will always contain one intentional error.

— Editor

Dear *Amazing*:

Have been enjoying reading your November issue. Your magazine helps provide a sense of community among some of us here in High Point, which is not exactly a center for original or futuristic thinking. Since I do not belong to any SF organizations, the only contact I receive which relieves a certain sense of isolation is through the various publications I get in the mail or at the bookstore. In fact, when I do get to the store, about once a month, it is almost with a feeling of being on a pilgrimage.

So, thank you for providing such a lively source of entertainment.

I am an illustrator by profession and have been involved with reading science fiction, speculative fiction, whatever, since I was, well, a whole lot younger than I am now. I am fairly well trained in preparing artwork for printing, etc. Recently, a long-time friend suggested we collaborate on a story. Since she is very word-oriented, I thought she meant I could do illustrations. I was much surprised to discover that she actually wanted me to *write* with her! Sounds!

Preparing manuscripts, getting publishers, all the myriad duties of a writer are alien to me, so imagine my excitement when I saw the little ditty on page sixteen about this very thing. So, if you will, please send to me two copies of *Constructing Scientifiction & Fantasy*. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Sincerely,

Anna Lyon
High Point NC

And thank you — but you overpaid us. The quoted price consists of 75¢ handling charges for each order, and the booklet is 25¢ a copy.

Yes, sense of community indeed. It was the letter columns in the earliest issues of Amazing that brought SF fandom into being. Merely to know that there are others out there, talking to one another, is a good feeling which books, even a continuing series, cannot give.

— Editor

Dear Mr. Scithers:

My strongest reaction to the new *Amazing* is: but it's just like *Asimov's*! You've got the same interior layout, the same simple graphic layouts. The format is lifted directly from *Asimov's*. And with the January issue the stories, too, are lifted bodily from *Asimov's*.

Opinion: I don't think we *need* another *Asimov's*!

In fact, do we need *Amazing*? There aren't enough good stories to fill the three main SF magazines and myriad anthologies and fringe publications (opinion); *Amazing*, if you make it just another SF magazine, will only serve to dilute the market. An imitation of *Asimov's* (which is, in many ways, an imitation of *F&SF* (opinion!)) is not needed.

But *Amazing*, this field's oldest magazine, has a long and varied history; and if it was not always respectable, well, that's just part of its charm. *Amazing* has been known to feature two types of stories that are in short supply today: the solid action/adventure story, and the bizarre or experimental story (Bunch, Zelazny). Now picture this: a magazine that goes a step beyond the *If* of the sixties (which was two steps beyond the *Amazing* of the fifties) in that it publishes hard-hitting action SF for adults. Mixed in with this could be more experimental stuff (*If* published Delany, Zelazny and Ellison along with Laumer, Saberhagen and C. C. MacApp). *Asimov's Adventures* was a step in this direction, but was far too crude and juvenile. In the sixties, Fred Pohl said that he envisioned his average reader as being a teen-aged boy; presumably, since he published *Dhalgren*, he no longer believes this. Polls have shown the average age of the SF reader to be rising.

Why is this important? Because an SF magazine aimed at adults just might be able to get some advertising, and so break out of the dead-end of relying on the cover price for revenue. There are specialty magazines that have circulations smaller than *Analog* and *Asimov's* that are published on fine, durable paper; they feature quality graphics and layout, with lots of advertising. SF

magazines have been crude and cheap for too long. Someday they're going to take a quantum leap in quality and circulation, or die off, though it'll probably take a person of strong will and vision (and a ruthlessly carnivorous sales staff). (The destruction of "fandom" wouldn't hurt, either; "fandom" is a cancerous octopus that has long outlived its usefulness to science-fiction.) (Strongly held opinion!)

These are just hastily-typed, disorganized thoughts. I wish you luck with *Amazing*, wherever you take it; but please, don't make it look and feel like any other magazine (especially *Asimov's*! I feel the same way about it as I do about *Asimov*. I like; but one is *enuff*).

Banzai stf!

Sincerely,

Chris DeVito
Dix Hills NY

We think you are laboring under several misapprehensions. First of all, magazine readership polls going all the way back to the one John Campbell conducted, circa 1949, have consistently shown the average reader to be in his (and increasingly, her) late twenties or early thirties, having a college degree and a middle-class income. A poll taken at IA'sfm also showed, a little to our sur-

prise, that 25% of the readership had degrees beyond four years of college. We certainly don't believe that SF magazines are read by adolescents now, if they ever were. Adult readers look back and remember that they started at age 13 or so, and conclude that most readers are that age. This simply isn't so. The 13-year-olds don't quit; they become 30-year-olds, who have been reading SF all the while.

*We are also not sure how much you know about fandom. Certainly there are not enough "fans" to affect the life of a large-scale commercial publication. But we can appreciate fans for their support of some of SF's most ambitious and talented writers — Philip K. Dick, for instance — when the general public seemed content to ignore them. As for repeating our accomplishments at IA'sfm we are not worried about that. The new editor of that magazine is clearly taking it in another direction, and we are doing new things with *Amazing*. Editorial reruns lead to stagnation. The one thing we are most determined to do is change the "main three" to the main four. We intend to move it from the fringe, into the center of the field as fast as possible!*

— Editor



ON WRITING SCIENCE FICTION (The Editors Strike Back!)

by George Scithers, John M. Ford, & Darrell Schweitzer

"This book is a golden opportunity to see behind the editorial office doors and find out why some stories make it and most others are given printed rejection slips." . . . Tom Staicar in *Amazing SF Stories*

"If you have ambitions toward selling professionally, you ought to have a copy." . . . Don D'Amassa in *SF Chronicle*

This book is available in bookstores or directly from the publisher, Owlswick Press, Box 8243, Philadelphia PA 19101-8243 at \$17.50 (which includes shipping).



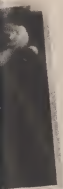
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that story, really.
Taking the notes.
or write it?"
would be lo.



KNIGHT OF SHALLOWS

by Rand B. Lee

art: Jim Bearcloud



Mr. Lee tells us that ever since he read Keith Laumer's classic Worlds of the Imperium, he has wanted to do an alternate-worlds story, but for fear of seeming derivative, has held off until now. Finally, in a fit of feeling angry with Key West, where he lives, his inhibitions broke down; and this story was the result. We think you'll agree that this is a fine and original story, and the author never had anything to be afraid of. He's an original.

They were not at all gentle. "You are a murderer!" they told him, whereupon he told them what they could stuff where; whereupon they said, "We can prove it." So they dragged him from his senior secretary's desk down in the bowels of Lifetimes, Inc., and dragged him up many elevators and through many security clearances to a place he had not dreamed existed. It was a room, empty except for a bean-bag chair and a wall-sized screen. "We're hooking you up," they informed him, although he neither felt any hooks nor saw to what he was being hooked up. "Now look," they said. So he looked in the screen, and saw, as they say in the Bible.

Afterwards, someone kindly cleaned him up; and they sat him down in a different room and talked it all over. "What do you know about probability mechanics, Roger Carl Shapiro?" they asked.

"Nothing," he said. "My God."

"Tell us what we showed you."

"You showed me some murders."

"Twenty-three, in fact. Did you see the murderer?"

"Yes." Dully.

"And whom did he resemble?"

"He was fat and he didn't have a beard."

"And whom did he resemble?"

"Abraham Ribicoff. Jesus, guys, what is this, some sort of psych——"

"And whom did he resemble?"

Silence. "Me. He looked like me." Pause. "Only overweight, and clean-shaven."

"Anything else?"

"And sad. He looked sad." Shapiro wept for some time.

When he was through weeping, they said, "What about his victims?"

"I don't know."

"Roger, this is important." [A consultation: "He's rejecting it. He's rejecting it." "Goddam it, he's *got* to accept it." "Try the back door."] "Roger, where did the murders take place?"

This was easier. "A bar. It looked like a bar I knew — a long time ago. Beejay's. On Duval Street, in Key West."

"That's good. You lived in Key West for five years, didn't you?"

"Yes." Pause. "After I got out of college. I was a bartender for a little while. I didn't like it, so I left." Another pause. "But it wasn't Beejay's. Bill would never have let them put in that linoleum."

"Do you remember the bartender?"

A long silence. "Yeah."

"Yes, who, mister?" ["General, for Christ's sake." "General, please."]

"Yes, sir."

"What can you tell us about the bartender, Roger?"

"He had dark hair."

"Anything else?"

"And dark eyes. He was different in some of the pictures. In some of them he had a beard; in others he didn't."

"What about his clothes?"

"He had a tank top, once."

"And whom did he resemble, Roger?"

"Nobody." Very quickly.

"And whom did he resemble, Roger?"

"Somebody — maybe — I don't —"

"And whom did he resemble, Roger?"

"The murderer. The guy who shot him over the counter." Shapiro put his hands over his face. "They both looked like me."

Much later they took him back into the featureless room and showed him other things in the screen. This time it was not murders he saw. "Probabilities, Roger," they said to him. "Probability mechanics is a phenomenon unfathomable to anyone wedded to the old physics. Consciousness as a basic force in the universe. Or rather, multiverse. You're looking at logical spin-offs from the eventualities of your life."

They showed him a farm somewhere, with fields growing many kinds of vegetables. It was a commune. He saw himself, digging sweet potatoes. He was more muscular in the picture, although in real life he was not too bad, either. "This *is* real life," they said to him.

"I thought about joining a commune once," he admitted. "East Wind, in Tecumseh. But I didn't."

They showed him his uncle's synagogue, in Bridgeport. He was sitting in the front row with a woman he did not recognize until he noticed the necklace she was wearing. His mouth went dry. "Shirley Greenblatt," he moaned. "What in hell did I want to go and marry her for?" But the man on the screen looked happy.

["We're getting there. He's starting to accept it."]

They showed him alone in a darkened room, masturbating. "Hey," he said. One side of his face was badly scarred; he was sitting up in a chair with his legs bent queerly. The door opened; the man in the chair covered up. A woman came in with a face drained of life, bearing a tray. "That's Mom. What in hell?"

"We were going to ask you. Were you in a car accident?"

"Jesus. No, never."

"This 'you' was."

They showed him walking down a street somewhere in a shiny suit, looking prosperous. They showed him standing in front of a group of old people with a black yarmulke on his head. "The last time I wore one of those was when Dad died." The people on the screen were smiling. They showed him swinging a blonde child in the air. They showed him running from a pack of dogs in a bombed-out city. They showed him swinging from a rope, one end of which was knotted around his neck. "Charming," he said.

"But it happened, somewhere."

"Somewhere where?"

"In another sequence of probabilities. All these men are you as you might have been — as you might be — if you had made or do make a certain series of choices."

"No way would I choose to hang myself."

"Haven't you ever considered suicide?"

"I'd take pills. I'm a coward."

"If you had no pills? And were driven to desperation?"

He remembered certain August nights in Key West. "Yeah."

They showed him a woman with dark hair working at a computer console. "Now that I like to see," he said. "Do I get to marry her?"

"Hardly. She's you."

"You guys are nuts."

"Not all probability sequences arise from human choice. Some of them arise from natural events: an extra chromosome, for instance, introduced to your biological makeup because one sperm made it to your mother's ovum first."

"That's me as I could have been if I'd been born a woman?"

"Yes. Now most sequences, like the Armageddon scenario — the dog-pack picture — are a combination of your choices, the choices of others, and natural event. You came to work here at Lifetimes, Inc., because the economy is bad and you couldn't get enough of your articles published to support yourself on your writing. God knows why we hired you; you're hardly efficient secretary material. A situation arising from many different factors, some of them dependent upon your choices."

"Bull. It was the only thing I could do. I needed work."

"You could have made it as a writer. You still can." Roger Shapiro stood up. They waited. He sat down again. "We've seen a sequence where you did stick it out and did very well. We've seen another sequence where you stuck it out, then quit, became a janitor at a grammar school, went back to writing, and won the Pulitzer Prize."

"These aren't actors, then."

"No. They live and breathe at this moment. The ones who aren't dead, of course."

"Where? Not here."

"No. In other universes."

After a very long time he said, "What about the murders?"

"What do you think?"

He thought. "If what you've been handing me is straight shit, they could be me. Could have been me. The bartenders I saw get shot. Because I did work at Beejay's for a while, and I guess I might have stayed on."

"The bartenders were you, all right."

"Then I don't get the murderer. He looks like me, too, if I'd let myself go, or gotten real depressed over a long time. Assuming these alternate universes exist, there's no way I could exist twice in the same one. Much less kill my other self. I mean, why would I want to?"

[A silent chorus of cheers from the observers behind the briefing room wall.]

"Twenty years ago, when we started this company, we would have agreed with you."

"But now?"

"We know it is possible. Not only to view our probabilities, from this screen here; but to enter them."

He laughed and laughed, and they decided it was enough for one day.

They did not let him go back to his sec desk, but they did not keep him a prisoner, either. He was given a considerable raise in salary, many security passes, and freedom to come and go between 5 P.M. and 8 A.M. The first night he did not go home at all, but sat watching dirty movies in a twenty-four hour theater. The next day they showed him more pictures, without commentary. He saw himself buried as a child in the corner of the family plot in Roxbury, Connecticut. In real life — in his base sequence, as they insisted upon calling it — he had recovered from the pneumonia. He saw himself giving blood in an Army hospital. He had never been in the service. He saw himself working bar in a Beejay's identical to the one he remembered, until he looked more carefully and saw that the napkins had **BIG RED'S** printed on them and that his other self had a mermaid leering from his right arm.

He discovered that his apartment had been cleaned in his absence and the refrigerator-freezer freshly stocked. In his bedroom he found a folder. He opened it and drew out some photographs. One was of a diploma with

his name on it, issued by a university from which he had not graduated. He had transferred following his sophomore year. The second was of him with a man in a large oval bed. The third was a photograph of a page of manuscript. It was somewhat blurred, as though it had been blown up from a detail. He sat on the edge of his bed and read it; then he read it again.

The next day they said, "Well?"

"I believe you."

Suspicion. "What convinced you?"

"None of your business."

"What con —"

"I said it's none of your Goddam business." He stood. "Now you want something from me. What is it?"

"Please calm yourself, Roger."

"Jesus." He sat, fighting back tears. "Okay. Shoot."

Carefully. "We're prepared to show you other proofs: retinal scans, handwriting comparisons, other documents we've photographed through the viewers. However, to answer your question in a nutshell: we want you to help stop this murderer."

"Why me, if you'll excuse the cliché?"

"Because you're the only person in this universe who can enter your chain of probability-sequences. And that's what it'll take to stop him."

"Wait, wait, wait." He viewed them through narrowed lids. "You people can look into my — probabilities — but you can't go into them?"

Discomfort. "I'm afraid so."

"How come?"

"We don't have the time and you don't have the background for us to explain that satisfactorily. You must accept that we are telling you the truth. We would far rather entrust this task to a trained operative if it were at all possible. That we are asking you to take it on should be evidence enough of our sincerity."

"Asking me to take it on?"

"Urging you."

"Ordering me. Coercing me. Shaming me."

"If you like."

"Jesus." He pondered. "I'm not a cop. I can't fight, and I don't know how to shoot a gun. And I've never killed anyone."

"We're not asking you to kill him."

"You've lost me. I thought you said you wanted me to stop this guy from murdering people. Shit — from murdering me."

"To answer that, we have to answer a question you haven't asked yet: how can this alternate 'you' travel from probability sequence to probability sequence? In fifteen years of alternate monitoring, he is the first such interfacar we've encountered."

“ ‘Interfacer’?”

“Dimension-shifter. We’ve assumed that our probability-sequence was the only one in which probability mechanics has been developed. This may sound harsh to you, but the mere fact that you are murdered in sequence after sequence would not be enough to impel us to interfere. It is that an alternate persona is murdering your other selves — that is the crisis. So: how can he shift from sequence to sequence? We assume it’s by the use of equipment similar to that which we have developed. Why do we not want you to storm into a sequence and gun him down? Because we need to know more about him. We need to know whether he is working alone or as the agent of someone else, some other-sequential person or persons. Imagine the possible danger to our universe if there exists an organization or culture of malevolent interfacers?”

“Come on,” said Shapiro. “Come on, guys. Be realistic.” Smothered laughter from behind the wall. “Look who’s being murdered, will ya? Every murder you’ve shown me so far has me tending bar in goddam Key West. What organization of malevolent ‘interfacers’ would waste their time bumping off nobodies?” His interrogators exchanged embarrassed looks. “I mean, I’m important to me and maybe to God, for God’s sake, but who the hell else?”

“We think it might be a test run.”

“Swell.”

“We don’t know. That’s just it, Roger. This is new to us. We don’t know a thing. He could just be a nut. He’s apparently been connected with probability mechanics work in his own sequence; he might even be someone important.”

“Thanks for admitting the remote possibility,” said Shapiro.

“It’s his base sequence that we want to get to. Now we could search among your probabilities-line for eternity and not hit on the right sequence. Or we could send you to follow him home.”

“Follow him home to his universe of malevolent interfacers?”

“That’s it in a nutshell.”

He sat quiet. “I have a lot of other questions.”

“We’ll do our best to answer them in the time we have.”

“How much time do we have?”

“We don’t know. That’s why we’d like to get going on this project pronto.”

“Who’s going to pay my rent while I’m gone?”

“It may not take long enough for that to be a problem, but we’ll support your obligations.”

“My insurance payments, too?”

“Yes. Although why you need life insurance as well as major medical eludes us. You have no dependents or close relatives to benefit from your demise.”

"There's my uncle, Sheldon."

"You hate your Uncle Sheldon."

"How convenient I'm turning out to be for all of you."

"Does that mean you'll do it?"

Silence. [Much tension behind the wall.] A grin. "Oy. And I thought I was working for a career planning service."

[Pandemonium.]

It all had to do with brain waves and energy fields, none of which Shapiro attempted to understand; to him it was just magic. They implanted things in his head and put a button under the skin of his left hand, which told them when he wanted to talk with them. He was given a weapon and made to practice firing it. They called it a burner; he called it his raygun. To everyone's astonishment, he was not a bad shot. They tried to give him lessons in self-defense but gave it up when he objected. "I'm not a fighter," he said. "I buckle under stress." This statement made them nervous, which was his intent. He watched his probabilities in the scanner by the hour. Most of them varied little from the lives he had glimpsed already; in none did a Lifetimes, Inc. appear. This intrigued him — the company had begun to figure so hugely in his existence that he could not understand why his other lines were not dominated by it also.

"The more improbable the involvement, the less likely it is that you'll see it in the screen," they told him.

He glimpsed the Pulitzer Prize sequence they had told him about and several more in which he was female. "Are my probabilities infinite?" he asked them. They said they didn't know. "May I see into somebody else's probabilities?" he asked.

Much apology. "We don't want to risk losing our focus on your sequences. It took a lot of time and effort to lock onto them."

To which he replied: "You lied to me."

"What makes you think that, Roger?"

"Maybe 'lied' is the wrong word. Omitted some information. To whit: which came first, looking into Roger's lifelines or stumbling onto Roger-the-Murderer?"

"Uh—"

"Allow me. If you say, 'Stumbling onto Roger-the-Murderer,' I will say, 'How? Were you looking through a catalog of random probabilities and chanced on little Roger's?' If you say, 'Looking into Roger's lifelines,' I will say, 'Why little Roger's? And who gave you the Goddamn right, you warped bunch of voyeurs?'"

Very pale indeed, they told him the truth: they had selected him and a number of other employees of Lifetimes, Inc., without their knowledge, to be part of their experiments in probability-viewing. They had been doing that sort of thing for many years. Each had been chosen for their single,

socially unencumbered status and tagged electronically to transmit their brain-wave patterns to the viewer complex. "We lock onto those patterns," they told him, "and they access the probability-lines for us."

"Do the others know what I know?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"This is a top secret facility."

"These are very private lives."

"We're explorers, not voyeurs. We don't control what images come to us, or how long they stay on-screen."

"Liars."

"We don't—"

"Liars. You must have image-holding capacity. How else could you have been following my murdering career so closely?" They admitted it all. They admitted also that they had chosen the unencumbered against the chance that they might come across a sequence demanding personal investigation. This Shapiro heard calmly. He did not walk out. He knew that they would not let him go at this juncture. Instead he said, "I want to talk to someone who's done this before."

"Done what?"

" 'Interfaced.' "

They brought her to him. She was a woman of about sixty, iron-haired, sharp-nosed, and gruff. She had the look of someone who had been important once and had given it all up because it had bored her. She lived, she said, in Monaco, which impressed him. "What do you want to know?" she asked.

"Why you went."

She was taken aback, and showed it in the flicker of her grey eyes. "For science, of course."

"Not you the professional," Shapiro said. "You alone with yourself."

She did not do him the discourtesy of evading him. "All right. There was a young man, many, many years ago. We were lovers for a while; we planned to marry. There were career conflicts. It didn't happen. I found a probability in which it did." She shrugged. "I wanted to see him again."

He stared at her. "You're not bullshitting me?"

"I don't bullshit."

He examined his nails. "I had dreams," he said. "They showed me a photo of a page from a story I wrote. They saw me writing it in the screen and shot it from the image." He looked at her. "I never wrote that story, really. But you know something? I remember planning it. Taking the notes."

"Why didn't you write it?"

"I was afraid it would be lousy. Because so much of my stuff was."

"Was it?"

"No. It was really good." He wiped his eyes. "I don't know who you are," he said, "but I want you to tell them some things from me. Tell them I'm not a kid, and I'm not a fool, and I resent like Hell how they've tried to intimidate me into this. I know they don't give a shit about me, or any of my 'me's; I'm convenient, a handle. I'm going to do this thing they want me to do because I don't think anybody has the right to put an end to somebody's choices."

"Fair enough." She rose to go.

"That includes them," he said. "Tell them that."

What she told them was, "You've got him."

And:

They flew him to Key West at night in a plane that did not have to change at Miami. He found himself staring at the clouds outside under the moon as though he might never see clouds or moon again. The gruff woman had sent a small package along to him, which when opened proved to contain a pocket notebook and a pen with a special ink supply. Inside the notebook, on the first page, she had written:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

It has rained three days in succession, but the air lies so thick on Duval Street that even the mosquitoes are sluggish, even the fragrance of the frangipani dampered. The tourists are few and irritable. "Worst goddam weather I ever saw," says a man from Ohio to a man from Michigan.

"It's a blanket bearing down," agrees a woman from New Jersey.

"Stay drunk; that's what I do," suggests a resident retiree. "Bartender? More of the same." The bartender comes over. His furry chest is bared and gleaming with sweat, despite the laboring of the big ceiling fans. To the woman the retiree says, "You want a pineapple colada? Roj makes the best pineapple colada in the Keys."

"Make it a gin and tonic," says the woman. "How long have you been sweating down here, Roj?"

The bartender grins. "Would you believe ten years?"

"The man's insane," says the Michiganian.

Roj's hands move deftly among the bottles. "It's not so bad. I used to live in Connecticut. That was a place to get away from."

"My sister lives in East Hartford," says the man from Ohio.

There are people playing pool in the adjoining game-room, and a few youths vying for a turn at Pac-Man; otherwise, the bar is empty. A stuffed flamingo stands in one corner. Above the bartender's station, Lucille Ball looks down from an autographed publicity still, as though presiding over this Friday night. "Ten o'clock," announces Roj. "Anyone want to hear the news?" No one does. Outside on Duval Street, the sign yells, **B.J.'S DEN**.

"I played Connecticut once," the woman is saying. "The old Wembley Theater in New Haven. I got the Mexicali trots from some lousy chop suey I gulped between acts. Talk about uncomfortable! It gave me eyestrain just to walk."

"Were you anybody important?" asks the Michiganian. She shrugs, then smiles.

"Nah," she replies. "But I could of been."

Roger Carl Shapiro walks out of the men's lavatory. He is wearing jeans and a loose cotton shirt, standard Key West costume. He halts near the cigarette machine and surveys the bar. At first he thinks, *It didn't work*. The same three tourists are sitting at the bar: the loud woman and the old man in the hibiscus shirt. The same flamingo stands in the corner. But the sign says **B.J.'S DEN**, and **BEEJAY'S**; and the floor has been painted ship-deck green; and the man behind the counter is himself.

ROGER-PRIME, says the wink-blink in his head. **HAVE YOU ESTABLISHED VISUAL CONTACT?**

He is like him, but unlike. His skin is darker; he looks almost Latino. There is a cigarette pack in the pocket of his shirt; Roger does not smoke. The greatest difference is the hardest for Roger to define: the man moves with a confidence that Roger cannot imagine possessing. *He's accepted things*, he thinks. *He's stopped running*.

All of a sudden he wants to go home. **ROGER-PRIME. WE ARE HAVING DIFFICULTY WITH THE VISUALS.**

He realizes that he has forgotten to engage the scanner circuit, which had to be turned off during transfer; he presses his left palm and receives, **ENGAGED**, in reply. He looks around, he needs a seat near the bar but not too near. In Beejay's there are booths; in B.J.'s Den there are none. He gathers his resolve and saunters up to the counter.

"Ever been to Montreal?" the man from Michigan is asking the woman from New Jersey. Roger selects a stool opposite the little group. At his back, the game-room door spills soft curses. the bartender comes over.

"What do ya need, friend?" Roj asks him. His eyes are very brown. **RETINAL SCAN CONFIRMED**, says the wink-blink. **THIS IS YOUR PERSONA FOR THIS SEQUENCE, ROGER-PRIME.**

"I know," says Roger.

"Pardon?"

"Sorry. I'll have a Perrier with lime, if you don't mind."

"Right." The man moves off. *He didn't notice*, wonders Roger. *He didn't see a thing*. He is conscious of the tourists looking him over, but his skin is light, his beard full, and the man behind the bar is clean-shaven. *Still*, he thinks, *I would have known*. Roj brings him the drink and asks for seventy-five cents, which Roger pays in coin. He does not have much money with him. He does not expect to remain for very long in each sequence. The watchers have noticed that in each probability in which the rogue interfacer appears, not only does he appear in this Key West bar, but he appears about the same time, always between 10 and 10:20 P.M. on this sultry Friday evening in June. The murder is always committed at 10:33 P.M., whereupon the rogue drops out of interface. Roger has asked them why; they have admitted ignorance. "Perhaps it's some conservation law," they have suggested. "Perhaps some limitation in his equipment." *Or maybe*, Roger has thought, *it's God saying there are limits*.

He has thought a good deal about God in recent days. ALL TRANS-MISSIONS FUNCTIONING NORMALLY, reports the light in his head. It does not sound very excited, but Roger realizes that his hand is shaking where it grips the Perrier. *Another universe*, he thinks. He watches himself fiddle with the cash register. *Me. That's me*. The days spent by the viewers have not prepared him for the tangibility of an interface. There are no sounds receivable through the viewers; no textures sensible. He smooths the wood of the bar-top. It is scored beneath the polish. It has a history; it was once a tree growing somewhere. *Was there a Hitler here?* he wonders. *A Vietnam?* *Was FDR a polio victim?* *Are there Key Wests where Hemingway never wrote, where gay people never learned to flock, where women still don't have the right to vote?* *Is there a best of all possible worlds?*

His mind feels three times too big for his skull, and the exhilaration that grips him is savagely intense.

The place begins to fill up. Roj calls out greetings ("Hey, Rita!" "Howzit, Mr. Foley?"); Roger stares, trying to feel a kinship with these acquaintances of his self. Beer foams; glasses tinkle. It is a neighborhood crowd: everyone seems to know everyone else, the tourists included. *They must be regulars*, he thinks. *Back every year*. He finds himself assessing these people in an unaccustomed way. It is as though his realization that there exists a multiplicity of each one of them has enhanced his appreciation of each one's individuality. He wants to let them know how important they are.

ROGER-PRIME, says the wink-blink. ROGER-PRIME, WE HAVE A NEW INTERFACE. REPEAT: A NEW INTERFACE.

He starts, looks toward the street entrance, then the men's room door. It is opening hesitantly. **GOING TO TELESCOPIC**, mutters the base. Roger's vision does not change, but he knows that back home, the viewers are zooming in. The rogue is wearing a light nylon jacket, too hot for this island; a conservative sports shirt; and rumpled dark trousers. He is baby-faced, overweight. He stands as though on eggs, unsure of himself, although Roger cannot think why he should be, having already killed as many as he has. He does not look like a murderer. **RETINALS CONFIRMED**, says the light in Roger's head. **THAT'S YOUR MAN, ROGER-PRIME. KEEP A LOW PROFILE.**

He's here, thinks Roger. *He's actually here.* They have told him not to interfere; they do not want the rogue knowing that he is under observation. The man moves slowly toward the drinks counter. He is looking at the bartender. Roger hunches over his Perrier and watches covertly. The resemblance between killer and victim is obscenely fraternal. Roger closes his eyes. **MAINTAIN VISUALS**, snaps the monitor primly. He opens his eyes and panics. The rogue is gone. Then he sees him a few yard away, making for the gameroom. *Is he that cold-blooded?* he thinks. The watch they have given him adjusts to the local time in each sequence; it says 10:22. *Eleven minutes*, he thinks, and is afraid.

He is not sure what he is afraid of. It is not of being hurt; it is not of seeing the violence: he has seen it so often in the screens, often dim, it is true, but unchoreographed, unclearly. He looks at the rogue. *You're afraid of finding out there's really no difference between him and you.*

The rogue goes into the gameroom and hovers near the pool tables. Shortly thereafter he returns to the bar. He sits on a stool four customers down from Roger. Roj goes over. "Help you?" Roger hears him say. It is 10:27.

"Perrier with lime, please," says the rogue. His voice is the voice of a shy adolescent: Roj's voice, completely drained of confidence. Roj moves to fetch the drink. Roger wants to shout, *You idiot, can't you see? Can't you feel what's coming?* He watches money exchange hands. He is struck by a sudden fancy: *Fingerprinting by and large is useless in cases of intersequential homicides. — Multiversal Policeperson's Manual.* The woman named Rita catches Roj's sleeve as he whisks by her. He bends forward, so that she can whisper in his ear. Whatever she says makes him laugh softly, showing strong throat and white teeth. Suddenly Roger remembers her. He had met her shortly before he had left Key West; she had been one of his boss Bill's significant others. She had given him a very long kiss at his going-away party. *And here she is*, he thinks. She is wearing a white peasant blouse, which will show the blood.

The rogue's face bears no expression; but he is watching her, too. Roger's nerves shriek.

More people come into the bar. At 10:30, the rogue slips his right hand

into his right-hand jacket pocket. The woman from New Jersey is announcing to all and sundry that she really, really could have been somebody in Hollywood if she hadn't given it all up for love. At 10:31, Roj is lighting a cigarette under the appreciative eye of Rita. At 10:32, the telephone next to the cash register rings; the bartender puts the receiver to his ear. The rogue gets to his feet. So does Roger. **PRIME** , says the wink-blink. **NO INTERFERENCE . WE 'VE LOCKED ONTO THE SUBJECT : REMEMBER OUR OBJECTIVE .**

"But," says Roger. The woman to his right gives him a curious look. Roj is grinning into the phone. The end of his cigarette flips up and down as he talks. The rogue takes his hand out of his pocket. Roger recognizes the weapon he is holding; he has seen it in the screen so many times before. It ejects a quiet red zip of needle light. Roj is facing Rita; the beam passes through him from back to front, taking most of his heart with it and spreading it over Rita's chemise. He does not even have time to look surprised.

And the rogue simply is not there.

INTERFACE , says the base in his head. **WE ARE TRACKING . PREPARE FOR TRANSFER , ROGER-PRIME .**

My God. Rita opens her mouth.

ROGER-PRIME , PREPARE FOR TRANSFER .

"My God." A tiny voice squawks from the dangling phone, just like in the movies. Roger gets off his stool. There are too many people around the screaming woman, and Roj's body has slipped down behind the counter. He stumbles toward the lavatory. He wonders how such a narrow beam can make a mess this size. His own raygun is much less dramatic. The lavatory swims toward him in the weak bar light. The door flies open and the retiree in the hibiscus shirt rushes out and past him. The bathroom is empty. He finds the rightmost stall, goes inside, and bolts the door. He sits down on the toilet seat, then remembers, and stands up. He presses his left palm. "Transfer," he says. "For God's sake."

TRANSFERRING , says the unemotional voice of the base.

His watch says 10:33.

Everything changes. There is no men's room, no bar, no uproar. He is standing hip-deep among weeds in a vacant field. Under a cloudless, moon-heavy sky, jasmine runs rampant where coral vine has not choked it out. He can smell the sea. Hidden frogs, with exquisite unconcern for probabilities, sound their territories in concert. He is shaking again. *Base*, he thinks. *Base, is this right?*

WE 'RE SORRY , ROGER-PRIME , comes the reply. **WE 'RE EXPERIENCING SOME DRIFT OF YOUR SIGNAL . WE 'RE CORRECTING NOW . YOU 'RE DOING WELL . DO NOT CHANGE**

POSITION; REPEAT, DO NOT CHANGE POSITION.

He does not. The moonlight gleams off blades of palmetto scrub. He hears the stir of the huge dark roaches, the "palmetto bugs" of the Keys, restless beneath the mangroves. He wonders why there are no big trees and no signs of buildings. *Maybe people have never come to this island*, he thinks. *No syphilis, no Cuban refugee "problem," no queer-bashing*. He wonders why he is not weeping. *He killed him*, he thinks. *He killed me. I killed me*. The chorus of the frogs touches his heart. All at once, he longs to remain here. *I'll welcome the Seminoles when they arrive*, he decides.

TRANSFERRING, says the base.

He is back in the toilet stall. The wall, which was green, is white where it is not scarred with graffiti. He is about to push open the stall door when it is opened for him. "Jesus, I'm sorry," says a man in a hibiscus shirt.

"No problem," says Roger-Prime. He walks past the man and washes his hands at a sink. In the mirror he observes Mr. Hibiscus go into the stall and close the door. It is the older man he has seen in the earlier sequence, but a more sober, more fit version of the older man. He looks at his watch. It says 10:04. He has half an hour before the next murder. He dries his hands and walks out into the bar.

The stuffed flamingo has become a stuffed pelican. The photograph of Lucille Ball now hangs over the cigarette machine. The floor is not painted green; it is wood left natural with sawdust sprinkled all over it. The television mutters a talk show; the picture quality is superb. No loud woman holds forth at the bar, no man from Michigan. The tourist from Ohio is there, however, and well on his way to intoxication. Of Roger's alter-egos there is no sign. The bartender is blond and very young. "What'll it be, bud?" he asks.

"Perrier with lime," Roger replies. The gameroom door is shut; a sign on it declares it closed for repairs. "When's your partner come on duty?"

"Carl? He's late now."

"Pardon me, sir," says the Ohioan, "but you're sitting in my friend's seat."

"Where do you know Carl from?" asks the young man.

"Around," says Roger-Prime. *Carl*, he thinks. His parents had struggled for three months over whether to name him Carl Roger or Roger Carl. "He might not even remember me; it's been so long."

"Sir," says the Ohioan. Roger squelches an urge to turn around and shoot the man through the throat. He gets up and moves around to the other side of the bar, taking his Perrier with him. Mr. Hibiscus comes out of the lavatory and sits down next to the Ohioan. Roger-Prime squeezes the lime into the mineral water and wonders how he can possibly sit through the experience again. He sips; bubbles feather his palate. He wants a real drink, but he does not know what it will do to the things they

have put in his head. He does not like the base's silent voice; it makes him feel exposed, as though he were walking around with his fly open. He looks up, and the young man is leaning against the cash register.

"Been in town long?" the boy asks.

Wrong move, buddy, Roger thinks. *A good barkeep should be able to tell when his customers want to be left alone.* "Not long. But frequently."

"You look kinda familiar. I been workin' here six months; you see a hell of a lot of faces in six months."

"Six months is a long time to work in one place down here," says Roger.

"No shit. Bill, the owner? He says the turnover at the Casa Marina's one person out of three every six months. What do ya expect? Key West is a dead end town."

"We must take the current when it serves," murmurs Roger-Prime, "or lose our ventures."

"Hey, Phil." A hand comes down on the blond's shoulder. It is the murdered man, now moustachioed, and somewhat disheveled. "Sorry I'm late. Some faggot took my parking spot."

"No problem," says Phil. "It's been slow." He leaves, glancing at the two of them so as to catch some spark of recognition jump between them; but Carl is busying himself about the bar and Roger is busying himself with his drink. *Did I talk like that?* he thinks. "*Some faggot?*" He studies his new self. Like Roj, Carl is deeply tanned, competently muscular, confident in his movements. Nevertheless, he has a disturbing arrogance that Roj did not have. Carl glances Roger's way and smiles professionally. Roger smiles back. *What are you made of, my man?* he wonders.

CONFIRMED, reports the base. THIS IS YOUR PERSONA, ROGER.

No kidding, returns Roger. *I thought I'd been cloned in the crapper.*

On the TV, a film critic whom Roger-Prime does not recognize is discussing a new Paramount offering. The star's picture is flashed; it is the woman from New Jersey. The clock on the wall says 10:15. A couple of French sailors come in with women hanging to them. They are followed by some young men in T-shirts; the shirts bear the legend: **EAT IT RAW — KEY WEST OYSTER BAR**. They are shaved almost bald, American Marines on leave from Trumbo Point. They giggle at the red pom-poms of the sailors. The bar fills slowly at first, then rapidly. He sees a great many military persons. Carl is kept busy, and by the time he has a moment free, it is nearly 10:28. "That was sudden," says Roger-Prime, because he must say something, do something.

"No fooling." Carl lights a cigarette, head cocked like the man in the Marlboro ads. "It's the base. The duty rosters are all screwy these days. Guys get off at weird hours."

No murderer yet. "Something up at Trumbo?"

"Falklands shit."

Roger hazards it: "I thought Thatcher had things pretty much under control."

"Thatcher? Where've you been, buddy? Maggie has gone home to that great brassiere factory in the sky."

"What?"

"Last week. Argentinian terrorists blew up her car. There've been rumors of British retaliation ever since. With Fidel backing Argentina and Uncle Sam backing England, a lot of kinds of shit could hit the fan. Excuse me."

The bartender wades away into dimness. *Ten-thirty*, observes Roger. The military people are drinking hard, as though they have things they want to forget. He is feeling very detached. He does not like Carl. *Where's our rogue?* he asks the base.

SCANNING, ROGER, they reply.

There are two minutes to go before Carl will be dead. He is shocked by his own thought: *No great loss, this one*. The wedge of lime lies belly-up at the bottom of his glass. The napkin says **BIG RED'S** on it. *Where is he?* he thinks.

EMERGENCY, PRIME. EMERGENCY. IMMEDIATE TRANSFER NECESSARY.

What's happened?

IT SEEMS TO BE OUR DAY FOR MISCALCULATIONS. HURRY, PRIME.

He forgets Carl. He slips from his stool and pushes his way through the crowd toward the men's room. There are some people by the urinals. All the stalls are filled. He waits, fretting. A man comes out of the middle stall. He rushes into it and locks the door. There is a window high up; through it he can see the branches of the royal poinciana swaying, showing off their vermilion under the street lamps. *Ready*, he says. *Ready, base*.

The building shudders. The lights in the bathroom go out. Men curse, and in the next room, glass shatters. People are screaming, but he knows that this time they are not screaming because of Carl. *Hurry up, base*, he thinks. He presses his palm repeatedly. "Hurry up, base, Goddam it, it's something bad." He remembers the screen image of the ruined city. *British retaliation?* he thinks. *Cuba's only eighty miles away*. "Base, what in Hell have you gotten me into?" He looks out the window. The sky is full of sea.

TRANSFERRING, says the wink-blink cheerfully. It is 10:33.

The wall is back to spotless green. The lights are back, and the building is quiet. *What happened?* he manages to ask. On the floor of the stall, a tract that was not there a moment previously says, **CHRIST IS THE**

ANSWER. "What happened?"

SORRY, PRIME: WE PROJECTED YOU INTO A CATA-
CLYSMLINE.

He sits down on the toilet and laughs weakly. *Taken at the flood*, he thinks. No wonder our rogue never showed up. Little Carl gets zapped by the Commies. He has drunk too much Perrier and he finds he must urinate. The wall, he notices, is the only fixture of the stall that is spotless. There is no paper in the toilet roll, and the floor around the tract is littered with cigarette butts. *Where am I now?*

ON TARGET, UH, A LITTLE LATE. It is already 10:20. WE
SCAN YOUR PERSONA NOT FAR. ALSO THE ROGUE.

I don't want to see another killing. Can't I wait out this one?

WE'RE HAVING TOO MUCH TROUBLE TRACKING HIM.
YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO SLAP A TRACER ON HIM.

Swell. How?

WE'VE BEEN THROUGH THAT.

*I do get murdered in this one, don't I? Not swallowed up in an earthquake,
or kidnapped by aliens?*

YOU KNOW WE CAN'T VIEW A PROBABILITY WHEN
YOU'RE IN IT, SAVE THROUGH YOUR TELEMETRY. THE
ROGUE IS, HOWEVER, AT INTERFACE.

Where's your sense of humor, folks? says Roger-Prime. He exits the stall. A man stands in front of him, combing his dark hair in the mirror. Roger moves past him; for an instant their reflections hang side by side. The man lowers his comb. It is the bartender. "Jesus Christ," he says. They are identical. There can be no mistake. Down to their beards, they are identical. The bartender faces Roger-Prime. He is high on something, and his skin is not deeply tanned. "Jesus, do you see that?"

"Sorry?"

"We could be twins." Roger-Prime does not know how to react. He affects mild interest.

"Huh. I guess. Didn't think anybody could match my mug for ugly." He starts to leave. The man will not let it go this easily.

"Wait." The bartender sticks out his hand. "This is like what they used to call a Cosmic Experience. You know, back in the Sixties, when we all believed in that stuff? I'm Shep."

"Uh, Shifter. Charlie Shifter." They shake hands. Shep's grip is firm. *Shep from Shapiro*, thinks Roger. All of a sudden he longs to know this man. "It is pretty amazing, isn't it?"

"So it's not just me. I mean, it was good Colombian, but it wasn't *that* good." He laughs. "I can't get over it. They say everyone's got a double somewhere. Doppelgänger. When you meet him, you die." He raises his eyebrows in mock terror. *My God, the rogue*, thinks Roger. *I can't let him see us together.* "Wait till Bill sees this. You want a drink?"

"I was just leaving, actually."

"Damn. I mean, I am definitely up there, but this. Even our beards. You in town long?"

"Not long," says Roger Carl Shapiro. He goes to the sink and turns on the water. His heart is pounding. *Doppelgänger, shit!*"

"I'll bet you're a writer, aren't you? Shep?"

"Jesus. Yeah. Trying, trying." Delight. "How'd you know?"

"You have the look. And you talk like one. I hear Key West is good for writers."

"I used to live here right after I got out of college." The words pour out. "I worked bar here, right in this place, and I tried to write, you know, in my spare time. Couldn't hack it. Woman troubles and shit. I hadn't set foot in the Keys till last October. Thought I'd give it another try." He is combing his hair again, unnecessarily.

"And how's it going?" Roger washes and washes.

"Well." His twin grins at him. Roger can just make out the tiny scar below Shep's left eye, where a dog bit both of them when they were four.

"I just sold a story."

Envy. Excitement. "No shit?"

"Just sold one. God damn, brother; it's better than orgasm! I've been trying for years. Giving up. Maybe it'll never happen again, but it happened once. Shit." Shep peers at him. "Come on in and have a drink. Business is shit."

"Uh." He imagines the people at the base, chewing their nails. It is 10:26. "Uh, Shep, actually, there's somebody in the bar I'm trying to avoid."

"Yeah?" Shep says, with sympathy.

"Uh, money matters. I'll tell you what. When do you get off?"

"Not till three, man."

"I'd, uh, really like to sit down with you some time. Do you have a number where I can get a hold of you?"

"Hey, yeah." The bartender searches his apron. Roger-Prime remembers the pad and pen that the grim woman has given him, and digs them out of his back pocket. Shep takes them and opens the book. Roger watches his eye strike the first page. "Fantastic. *Richard the Third*."

"I wondered which one it was from."

Shep writes down his address and phone number. "Higgs Lane. It's right off Elizabeth between Eaton and Caroline. I work nights, but if I'm out when you call, my old lady'll take a message."

"Old lady, huh?"

He grins again. "Either feast or famine, isn't it? I knew her before; her name's Rita. You'll like her." They shake hands. "You can get out without going through the bar; just make a right just outside here. There's a phone by the storeroom and the back exit's marked."

"Just like a spy movie."

"Hey, man. This is Key West. Anything can happen in Key West." Shep leaves. "Give me a call," he tosses over his shoulder. The lavatory door swings shut. Alone in front of the mirror, Roger-Prime takes out his burner. It is light in his palm, toy-like; the very very latest thing from Dow, of all places. PRIME₁ says the wink-blink. YOU MUST NOT INTERFERE.

"The Hell I mustn't."

WE MUST TRACK THE ROGUE TO HIS BASE SEQUENCE.
MORE THAN A FEW LIVES ARE AT STAKE.

"We don't know that."

YOU HAVE FOUR MINUTES TO ATTACH THE TRACER.
ROGER-PRIME?

"All right!" he yells, mind and voice together.

He hurls himself through the door. The bar has been remodeled and it takes him a moment to recognize the old lines beneath the ugly new. The cleanliness of the bathroom is echoed in the bar. The gameroom is a disco, at the moment silent. The Pac-Man and the pool tables line the Duval Street wall. Lucille Ball is nowhere in evidence. The drinks counter has been moved against the far wall, which means that anyone sitting there has their back to the lavatory. He spots the rogue almost immediately. The fat man has not changed clothing. He is sitting pensive in the row of vacant stools. The Michiganian tourist is shooting pool with the retiree, who has exchanged his hibiscuses for palm trees.

Base, says Roger. There's no way I'm going to be able to tag this pig without his seeing me. And once he sees me, he'll know what's what. Shep wipes the bar-top, moving around his killer so as not to disturb him.

WE MUST HAVE A TAG.

Not by me. Or do you want a universe of malevolent interfacers crawling up your asses?

There is silence for some time, for which Roger is grateful. He has put his gun back in his pocket, but as he watches Shep work, that foolish smile on his hairy face, he struggles once more with the temptation to kill the rogue. The fat man stirs in his seat; Roger ducks right, through an open door that has always been closed before, to the telephone and the EXIT sign. It is 10:30. He thinks, *If the rogue has a base backing him, why haven't they picked up on my presence yet?* He looks at the phone. A notion strikes him: a way he can interfere without giving away the game. *Our voices are the same*, he thinks. *If I call the cops and say it's him, they'll never know it isn't.* He picks up the receiver.

"There's no time," says a voice. "Besides, cops don't intimidate him. He can shoot in a second and interface as quickly." So Roger turns. She has come out of the men's room; she lets the door swing shut and approaches him quickly. She wears a grey jumpsuit; her dark hair is

thickly looped about her head. *Uh, base*, he thinks. "They can't read you," she tells him. "Your telemetry is somewhat limited; a convergence of four personas is a little much for it."

"You're the woman I saw in the screen. Sitting at a console."

"Quite possibly. I've been following you, I'm afraid."

"You're me, then, too." His palms sweat.

"My name is Catherine. My mother's name. Catherine Shapiro." It is his mother's name, too. "I'm here to help. Our base has been monitoring him for a long time. I'm supposed to impress upon you the historicity of this occasion: the first meeting of representatives from the two benign, interfacing cultures."

"Is that what we are? Benign?"

There is concern in her face, but it is controlled.

He feels instinctively that he is in the presence of power. "We have to stop him. He's going to kill one of us in two minutes. And this one of us is a particularly nice guy. We have to stop him."

"That will be difficult. I've tried."

He starts.

"Oh, yes. I've tracked him through eleven sequences, personally."

"Does he work alone?"

"Yes. We're in contact with his base sequence. He's a genius, Roger. He's responsible for most of their breakthroughs in probability research. What he's got is an experimental, portable interface-unit, something we've never even begun to develop. He stole it on its test-run. His people want him back."

No rogue base. A weight lifts from him, and he is freed. He takes out the burner. "What are you doing?" she whispers.

"I won't let him kill Shep."

"I won't let you kill him." Her weapon is pointed at his chest. "Be reasonable, Roger. His people want him back alive. They're prepared to exchange technical data for him."

"I thought you said you'd never met anyone from an interfacing culture before."

"We haven't. You can't enter a probability that your persona has vacated. But we've learned to communicate with them. As we're communicating with your base, now."

"There has to be a way to save Shep. There has to be a way." *He has to finish*, he thinks. *He's going somewhere. He's off the shoals.*

"There is. Put your weapon away."

He believes her. He pockets the burner. *One minute.* A few new customers have entered. They hear the woman from New Jersey and Shep's delighted greeting.

"Does he know you're after him?"

She nods. "He's seen me several times. But he has no monitoring

capability. All he can do is shift. Now listen." She lowers her gun, but does not put it down. "This is the first good chance I've had to get at him when the bar wasn't crowded. I'm going to shoot for his weapon-arm. I think I'm a better shot than you are, from what I've seen. When I hit him, he's going to interface. Don't let him see you. Follow him."

"How? On foot?"

"Your base will regain control when he interfaces. They'll want you going after him whether or not they believe my people."

"What about you?"

"I'll meet you. Between us, we may be able to trap him."

It is 10:32½.

It has all happened too quickly, and what happens next he is not prepared for. She races into the bar. He cannot keep himself from pursuing. She falls into a crouch and fires, all at once. The rogue is on his feet, raising his burner. Shep is out from behind the counter, facing the woman from New Jersey, his left side exposed. He is grinning from ear to ear. His shoulder is three feet from the rogue's muzzle. Catherine's beam strikes the fat man's wrists; he vanishes with a scream, like a sentient balloon when pricked. His burner clatters on the filthy wood floor. Instantly, Roger's head is full of chatter. Catherine starts forward, toward the gun. Something warns her; she flings herself backwards, ripples, and fades out.

"What in hell?" says Shep. He bends down to the spot where the rogue's weapon lies glowing. It blows up in his face.

TRANSFERRING ♪ says the wink-blink happily.

He wails in darkness. He is in a box of a room with dust and skeletons. TRANSFERRING. He is in an open meadow, and people are flying kites. TRANSFERRING. He is buried, earth pressing. TRANSFERRING ♪ TRANSFERRING! He is up to his ears in mud, surrounded by curious, long-necked animals with eyes like dinner plates. TRANSFERRING ♪ GODDAM IT! He is in a bar with blue walls, a bar with grey walls, a bar full of naked men gyrating to music, a bar thick with sweet pot smoke, a bar of slime and ancient rot. He wails for Shep, whom he loves. TRANSFERRING ♪ they say.

The shadow settles and stays. He is kneeling in a deserted room. There is no furniture, not even a drinks counter. The street windows have been boarded up. A few cracks admit anemic moonlight: no electric Duval glow. Wind whines outside. The only other creature in the room is a pregnant cat. With no place to hide, she stands with feet rigid and back arched in the center of the room, bristling with every night-fear. His watch has stopped.

The smell of the pot still clings to his clothing. He wonders who he is.

Roger Carl Shapiro, comes the reply, but he seems to remember other names as well. He sits down, and a discomfort at his buttocks makes him rise. He draws the pen and notebook from the back of his jeans. **There is a tide**, he reads.

"Roger?"

She has materialized in the gloom. Her features are ashen, like her clothing. "Hello, Catherine," he says. "It took off his — it took —" He stops. On the second page, the name is written, in Roger's own sprawling loops, **R. C. Shapiro**, and the rest: **#8 Higgs Lane Key West Fla 33040 (Shep) Call me buddy!!! 66403**. He puts the book away. "What now?" he asks.

"I don't know." She stands peering out between some slats. "I'm not sure where we are. Rather, I know where we're not. This isn't a murder sequence. It's another cataclysm zone."

"You heard?"

"I'm afraid I was partly responsible. My following you is what's been causing the drift in your signal. My people have corrected for it now, but —"

"Where is he?"

"The rogue? Nowhere."

"Dead?"

"No. Unconnected as it is to an external power source, his shifting equipment must carry its own energy supply. He needs to recharge after every shift. He does this between probabilities."

He does not even ask her what this means. "Then why are *we* here?"

"This is where he was heading when he dropped out of interface."

"You said I could help you trap him. How?"

She takes something from a pocket. "See these? They're like the tracer chips you're carrying. We've been able to do some scans of his unit, and we think that if we can manage to get these into him, we can remove the unit from his neural control and take over his shifting-capability."

"You think."

"We think."

"At least he doesn't have a burner any longer."

"At least we managed to do that much. He won't be killing any more Shapiros." She squats beside him. "Roger, I'm sorry."

"For me?" She cannot answer his tone. The cat has crouched, still suspicious, but no longer afraid. "You say this is a cataclysm zone?"

"See for yourself." He looks out a devastation. Under the Moon, the town is dead. The stucco looks scoured. Duval Street is strangled with rubble: rusted cars; masonry; blackened, leafless trees.

"What did it?"

"We don't know. My people have never monitored this probability before. They report no radiation or plague."

"Somehow, knowing that doesn't really comfort me." He looks at her. "You've sold out to them, haven't you? To your version of Lifetimes. You're their woman. You're sad because your lousy shot killed Shep, but not undone."

"Give me a break, you sanctimonious creep," she answers. ROGER PRIME says base. WE HAVE RECEIVED A COMMUNICATION FROM AN ORG—

I know all about it. Be ready to transfer me out of here if the Crawling Eye shows up.

CO-OPERATE WITH THEM, ROGER.

"Roger," she says urgently. "My people say he's interfacing. Here in the building."

The rogue is there. He has a weapon in his hand. Catherine yells and grabs Roger's arm. The world flares. His head fills with a low hum. He opens his eyes. Catherine has kept a hold of him. A cocoon of opalescent light has woven itself around them; through it they can see the rogue, cowering against a wall. His mouth is open. Roger-Prime fumbles for his burner. "Don't be stupid. You'd fry us both."

The rogue vanishes. Their shield dissipates with a little sigh. The cat has managed to work its head between two slats in an effort to escape the room. Numb, he watches it wriggle, but cannot summon the interest to help it. "Who works your shield, you or your people?" he asks. *So much for our little gain.*

"There's no time for this. He's on the run now. We have to catch him. Come with me." She heads for the lavatory. It is shut tight. Roger realizes that he has not seen a women's room in any of the probabilities. This strikes him as funny, and he giggles. She gives him a sharp look and takes her gun to the locked door. It flames and sags. A stench envelopes them. "Oh, Christ," she says. "Don't look." He looks. The lavatory is packed with skeletons. Roger-Prime leaps backward with a cry. She fires the weapon a second time. Bones blacken, fall to charcoal. Heat hits their faces. The stench does not lessen. She clears a space for them and leads him into the bathroom. "Are you all right?" she asks.

"I don't like death." *They were running*, he thinks. *From what?*

"Nobody likes it. Not even our rogue."

"You could have fooled me."

She takes him by the shoulders. "Some people deal with death by ignoring it. My mother was one. For three years after Daddy died she kept his dressing-table exactly as it had been on the day of the accident. She'd talk to him when she thought I wasn't listening. Other people deal with death by embracing it. The 'my life is over' bit. And some people accept it as part of living and get past it. Which sort of person do you think we're dealing with in our alter ego?"

"Let's talk about this someplace else," Roger says. She sighs and

consults her palm. **READY FOR TRANSFER**, his wink-blink announces. **TRANSFERRING**. She vanishes. He is alone among the stinking bones. "*What in Hell happened?*" he screams.

ROGER-PRIME, YOU'RE NOT TRANSFERRING. Something thumps the eaves of the building. "A seagull," suggests Roger to a skull. He knows it is not a seagull. He runs to the lavatory door. A dull green light is leaking through the slats of the boarded windows. For the first time he notices that the windows are boarded up on the inside. The pregnant cat is still stuck, and her wriggling has become fevered. "*Get me out of here base,*" he says. There is an unhealthy look to the light that makes his skin crawl. "*Base!*"

"Roger." He jumps and yells. She is back. "Your signal is being jammed. It might be the rogue, or whatever's out there."

"'Whatever?'" he says. "I love horror movies. Can I link with you?" One of the boards springs loose and clatters on the floor. He takes his gun and fires at the frantic cat. She flames briefly, then hangs still. "Can I link with you?" he asks again.

"Yes. We've never done this before, though; it might cut you off from your own people."

"I'd rather be stuck in your probability than here. Hurry up, Catherine; Jesus." Light slops from the space the board has vacated and leaks into the room. They retreat to the lavatory. Masonry groans somewhere; wood splinters and collapses. The doorway is filled with the sickly light. The stench increases. Roger cannot stop giggling; it is so much like a Lord Dunsany story he once read. The woman grips his left palm and presses her left palm to it. Base squawks in his head, then goes silent. A strange voice resonates within him: **TRANSFERRING, CATHERINE-PRIME**.

It does not happen. The wall to the men's room dissolves into a writhe of worms. Something rears up, not at all pleasant. *More power, base*, thinks someone. *You have five seconds*.

READY, says her base.

Then do it! they cry together. The light sucks at them. Roger does not notice the transfer; he is too busy screaming. It is 10:33.

They are falling, the three of them. It is a strange fall, more like a dance than a fall: at junctures they seem to orbit one another, and interweave, and very nearly coincide. Roger-Rogue fires his reserve weapon repeatedly. The beams exit the nozzle and spread into rainbows, and ribbons. *Catherine!* cries Roger-Prime. *Between*, she replies. He reaches for her, and finds her moving away from him. Roger-Rogue fires a spray of silver, edged with blue. *You bastard!* cries Roger-Prime. *You filthy Nazi!* His words become pillows, which strike the rogue about the ears and send him tumbling in a great cartwheel.

Catherine-Prime is at Roger-Prime's elbow. *Let it take you*, she says to him. *Don't fight.*

I've never fought, he thinks. The words string themselves out against a milk-white sky, black as beads. *Give me the chips.*

Wait till it ends, she cries. *We're between interfaces.*

I know where we are, he says. *The chips.* She gives him two of the four. He dives for the tumbling rogue.

The first thing he notices is the sound of a fountain. He is lying under a curve of concrete. He pulls himself up to sitting position; he has materialized in a messy garden. It is surrounded by a high brick wall matted with jasmine. An arbor of glory-bower spills its blood-red, white-bracted blooms into the nights, but the trusses need trimming, and several of the slat supports are broken. In the fountain bowl, a bird floats gently. He does not put his hand into the water. The sky is clear. On the other side of the wall, a royal poinciana displays its plumage. He recognizes it as the one that has grown outside the bar in most of the sequences. *Base*, he calls. His mind is empty.

Another dead zone, he thinks. He gets to his feet. He feels fatigued but not exhausted. Catherine is nowhere to be seen.

The house at the back of which he stands is something from a Key West guidebook: a two-storied, New-England-style structure with peeling white paint and gingerbread railing on its balconies. He finds a door and opens it. There is a wood-burning stove, copper pans on hooks; copper sinks with ornamented fittings that look as though they are made of brass. Noting the disrepair of the garden, he is not surprised that the metals are tarnished and dull. Things tarnish quickly in the salt air of the island. He notices no plastics or paper toweling. He roams the house rapidly, searching for the rogue. There is much wickerwork, mostly white. There are no electric outlets. One room is a Victorian fantasy of lace, velvet, and polished wood. The wood has been polished recently, and smells of honey.

Throughout the house he finds many photographs of poor quality in gilt frames. They are all of stern bearded men and unsmiling dour women, dressed in clothing similar to that which was worn in the century before his own. One he picks up and studies. The man stands behind the woman. She is seated on a white chaise. They are dressed in black. Their expressions are restrained, but not miserable. The woman could be Catherine; the man, the rogue. He finds them in another portrait, too: she is aswirl with lace and satin and he wears a top hat. The formality of the moment cannot hide their happiness. Her hand is clasped in his.

The photograph is faded, and a bit smudged, as though it has been handled many times.

In one of the upstairs bedrooms he finds a chair, and he sits in it. It is a man's room, darkened by many mauves; but there is lace at the windows.

He looks out of one of them. Duval Street has been stripped of its tarmac down to hard-packed earth. The trees far outnumber the houses. There are no streetlamps, no traffic lights. Men in queer costumes stalk up and down, some in groups of three and four, most alone. The moon touches sails on the harbor. A saloon spills noise far down the street; occasionally a horse trots by. Once he sees a black woman, burdened and solitary; some sailors catch at her, and she flees from their laughter. Mosquitoes dance about his neck.

Not a dead zone, he thinks. *Just a quiet house owned by an indifferent housekeeper. Maybe he's too poor to keep servants, or too fearful to.* He begins a methodical search of the room. At the base of the big oak wardrobe he feels something give; a hidden spring uncoils, and a drawer slides open. In it lies a raygun.

The creature must have screwed up our signals. I shifted sideways, and he shifted backwards and sideways. No other explanation occurs to him. He wonders if the bride is she. There is another bedroom; he walks into it. It is a woman's room, full of bric-a-brac. The bed is turned down, the mosquito netting lovingly arranged. About the dressing table hangs a scent of rose. He traces the perfume to a small porcelain jar filled with leathery petals, topped with a perforated cover. There are more photographs. The rogue is in some of them, but most of them are of her: perched on a horse looking uncomfortable; in an ugly travelling-costume, standing with an old woman against the backdrop of Big Ben; very young, with her hair down, at a piano.

Young, and with her hair down. He looks more closely. The girl is perhaps fifteen.

There is another wardrobe. Inside it he finds a row of gowns. Most of them are silken, many faded. Some are so rotted that they fray under his fingers. *Things rot fast here*, he thinks, *but none of these have been worn in years.* He looks around again, and for the first time notices the stain on the ceiling, high up near one corner. He rushes back to the photograph of the girl. "Damn," he murmurs. "Goddam, it isn't her!" Catherine has never had a childhood here. He goes back downstairs. In the photograph in the parlor, the woman is in her forties, the man in his fifties.

She never made it here, he tells himself. *But he did. At some point, sometime. His wife must have been our persona in this probability.* He does not understand the time inconsistency, and he does not care. *She died, and he left her dressing-table as it was.* It is all part of the same pattern: the ignoring of death. It is finally clear to him why the rogue has killed. *Probability sequences are choices made manifest*, he thinks. *Before shifting was brought home to us as a reality, we could dream of ourselves as we might have been, and somewhere deep down hold out to ourselves the illusion that there's still time to do that one great thing. To recoup our losses. Probability mechanics put an end to that indulgence. It told us, "Too late; you could have*

been this if you'd done this then, but not any more."

The rogue has not been able to accept the reminders of his could-have-beens. Roger thinks of Catherine. *We're lucky*, he thinks. *I might be able to accept your sequence, and you might be able to accept mine. But would either of us be willing to change places with him?*

"So there you are," says Roger-Rogue. "I expected you years ago. You don't know our Amazon friend never made it here. Perhaps she did, and I killed her." He is no longer fat. There is a strange scar on his forehead, and he is whiskered. "I see you found my burner."

"You've done well for yourself," Roger says. The man laughs. There is much of Carl in him; a little of Roj. "You've been stranded, haven't you?"

"Beached," says the rogue, and jumps him.

He is strong, and he knows how to fight. He gets on top of Roger and pummels him. His face is full of glee. The burner bumps and skitters. Roger-Prime reaches up through the blood and slaps two chips against the man's neck. Then he puts the heel of his right hand under the rogue's chin and pushes hard. The grey head snaps back. They grapple, Roger biting and screaming Shep's name. He has never hit anyone as hard as he could; he does this now. The rogue sags. Roger scrambles to his feet and dives atop the burner. It is somewhat larger than his own, with a battery compartment. He points the muzzle.

The man has his face. "So get it over with, already," Roger-Rogue says.

"Where are we?"

"Somewhere to right angles of your 1982," his persona answers. "A retarded time, and quite racist. Kill me, will you?" The rogue keeps his tone light.

Roger grins, knowing better.

"You find this situation amusing?"

"Those telemetry-chips are glowing," Roger says. He grins and grins. They have not lost him. "You're about to enjoy a belated visit home." The man touches his neck. The chips have sunk into the flesh, shedding pearly light. "Beached, huh? That scar have something to do with it?"

"You're perceptive," Roger-Rogue says. "I knew you were both after me; I'd killed enough of us to feel reasonably avenged. I shifted at random. It was foolish. I shifted to — not a cataclysm zone, precisely, but a disaster sequence — an improbability. It was —" He laughs and rolls his bleeding head. "Oh, Jesus. I still dream about it. They weren't human at all. Not at all. We'd evolved into something quite different; I can't imagine what ancestry. I rather horrified them, I imagine. They attacked me."

"Sounds human enough."

"Yes. I was struck," he taps his forehead, "here. You may know that I designed the shifter to be a plate of microcircuitry, a glorified Fresnel

disc, actually. I had them implant it against my skull. I had good reasons at the time: it made for a more efficient tie-in to the volitional centers. When our cousins struck me, they disrupted the circuitry. I made one more shift. I landed here."

"Was that before or after the rainbows?" demands Roger-Prime.

"What rainbows?"

"The ones in the between-place. You shot them out of your raygun."

"I'm not going home," says Roger-Rogue. He claws at his throat.

"Goddam you, this is my home!"

"Calm down or I'll burn this house to the ground." It works. The man drops his hands. "Get up." He does. "Now tell me what was so Goddam terrible that you had to kill twenty-five nebbish bartenders to avenge it."

The man looks astonished. "Don't joke with me."

"I'm asking. One of them could have been a very dear friend of mine."

"Why, to avenge this." He spreads his hands. "This. Look." There is a mirror hanging on the parlor wall. He stands before it, his lean face full of loathing. "Can't you see? It's indelible. I'll never lose their mark on me. It was always, 'Work, work,' and I was always alone. My private life? I didn't have one. They were surprised that I should even want one. I didn't look like something out of an ad campaign, you see. I was Roger the Researcher. I hope you're finding this entertaining."

"Illuminating."

"Confession is good for the soul. When people weren't there, food was. It was my only comfort for some years, that and masturbation. I tried to shed the weight; I never could. Eventually I tried to quit that Goddam research position. They wouldn't let me do that, either. Do you know what it's like to breathe air like sterile gauze day in and day out?"

"You could have left."

"Don't tell me what I could have done." The skin around his nostrils has turned pale. His fists are knotted. "You've made it. You got out. You've never had to wrestle night in, night out with the weight of your Goddam flesh. Don't tell me what I could have done. Her family found me when I showed up here: the Sappers. It's unwise to be Jewish in this sequence. I convinced them I was their cousin, somehow; who knows? And she," he says, the tears streaming, "she loved me. Now old man Sapper is dead; now Kathy's dead; T.B., it's still deadly here. And I'm back where I started. Alone." Suddenly he laughs. "God, what a penchant I have for melodrama. I should have written plays. At least I ended up in Key West. You know? When I was in college I wanted to be a bartender? It seemed — so sexual. And free." He holds out his hands. "Please shoot me."

"I'm sorry," says Roger-Prime. "I understand what you're saying. But it's not enough." The rogue's eyes widen; Roger hears a sound behind him. He glances over his shoulder. It is Catherine, dressed in a blue

jumpsuit, looking no older than he remembers her. "Well, hello," he says. "We've got to stop meeting like this."

"Good work, Roger." Her left hand smooths an antimacassar, and her right keeps her gun trained on the rogue's chest. "You can lower your weapon. Doctor Shapiro, if your present circumstances are as melancholy as you indicate, you're lucky we caught up with you when we did."

"It would be so simple if you'd just shoot me," says the rogue.

"What are you going to do?" Roger asks her.

"Shift him back to his home sequence. My base and his have linked equipment: our sensors isolate and amplify his signal, and they do the actual recalling. When he gets home, he'll have some minor surgery."

"I assumed that. I meant, what are you going to do with him after they've removed his portable shifter? What happens then?" She looks blank. "Catherine, he's a murderer. He has to be tried."

"Of course," she says. She is thumbing her left palm. The chips embedded in the rogue's neck have begun to glow a deeper color, an almost-peach.

"Wait," pleads Roger-Rogue. He points. Slowly Roger-Prime picks up the photograph of the happy newlyweds and hands it to the scientist. "Thank you," says the older man. He looks at the picture as though he has never seen it before. The blood trickling down his neck turns orange-red



in the glow from the chips. The rogue looks at his dead wife, then at Catherine. "You're nothing alike," he pronounces. "You looked exactly alike, and you're nothing alike." Puzzled, she frowns. Roger looks again at his older persona, and sees his face begin to crumble from the forehead down, wrinkle and crumble and twist with anguish. All at once, Roger-Prime feels the way he felt facing the skeletons in the cataclysm sequence. He backs off, awash with dread. *It's me*, he thinks, knowing it with a certainty with which he has known nothing else. *It's me, dear Christ, it really is me. Everything squandered. All the richness.*

He hears Catherine say, "They're transferring him — now." The peach light spreads suddenly over the rogue and swallows him. An instant later, he is gone. "Are you all right?" the woman asks him. "I drifted; they had to recall me and send me out again after you. You're all bloody; did you know that?"

"My head's empty," he says.

"Your base lost you when I transferred you out of the cataclysm sequence. I'm afraid you're going to have to shift home with me; it'll be easier to project you to your own sequence from our base. Is that all right?"

"Sure, Company Lady." He sticks the rogue's burner into his pocket. Her eyes are narrowed, trying to fathom him. "Bravo for us, huh?" He grins. "We caught him. No more bartender-Shapiros biting the dust. He married us in this sequence, you know."

"That's sick." READY FOR TRANSFER, her base says in his head.

"I think I understand it. I think he and I are a lot more alike than you and I."

But she surprises him. "We've all been beached and set adrift, Roger," she says. "That, and hugged the coastline waiting for the perfect wind to blow. And he's by no means the worst of us. I've sat at our scanners longer than you have, I think." She pauses, then smiles back at him. "There are no safe harbors."

They both laugh. "Then we'd better get a move on," he says. "New tide's in. And I'm sick to death of the shallows." He feels the pad in his back pocket. *I'll do it for you, Shep*, he thinks. *For you and Roj and Dodger and all of us. Who knows? Now that our three bases have started to work together, maybe we'll find one of us who's a publisher. The possibilities are endless.*

When the transfer comes, he is ready.



Last time in this space you read about The Zoo. Now, let me welcome you the The Factory.

If The Zoo, in Philadelphia, is the driving force behind *Amazing*TM *SF Stories* (and it is), then The Factory, in Lake Geneva, is the navigation system. From the time George sends a manuscript to us to the time the magazine appears on your newsstand or your doorstep, a lot of things have to happen. The people who make those things happen are these kind souls:

Mike Cook, the publisher of *Amazing* and the head of the Dragon Publishing Division of TSR Hobbies, Inc., get to make all the big decisions, because that's his job. He also makes a lot of the not-so-big decisions, because he *cares*, and he wants *Amazing* to succeed just as much as the rest of us do. Somebody once said that the best kind of boss is one who manages to get everyone else do all the work. By that standard, Mike Cook is a terrible boss.

By the same standard, Marilyn Favaro is a horrible production manager. But measured any other way, she's worth her weight in deadlines. (Deadlines don't weigh very much — as long as you *make* them.) Marilyn is *Amazing's* traffic controller, a job that makes shuffling 747s at O'Hare Field seem like child's play. She sends or receives virtually every piece of paper that makes the 1,000-mile journey from The Zoo to The Factory. She tries to make sure everything stays on schedule, and 99% of the time she succeeds. She *makes deadlines*, and if you know anything about magazine production, you know that's all that needs to be said.

Turning typewritten manuscripts into typeset magazine pages is where our

in-house Pre-Press Services quintet comes in. For obvious reasons, Dragon Publishing works very closely with the people in Pre-Press, where typesetting and page makeup are performed. For reasons that were obvious to you before now, we're very happy that Nancy Kerkstra, Gaye Goldsberry, Kathy Luedtke, Diane Burk, and Bruce Knutson are very good at what they do. The women are our keyboard virtuosos, who type every word of every story — with nary a slip — into the typesetting system. Bruce, he of steady hand and sharp eye, composes that type into the page mockups that we ship to the printer back in Pennsylvania. I'm sure Bruce would agree that if you ever see a crooked line of type, that must mean he was on vacation the day that page went down.

Debra Chiusano, the business manager for Dragon Publishing, has a nice combination of communication skills: she knows how to talk to advertisers, and she speaks the language of printers. That explains why all the ads in *Amazing* look so good, and why she spends so much time on the phone. It's not easy being bilingual. On the other hand, Pam Maloney, our one-person subscription department, only knows one language. (That's all she has time for.) But she speaks subscriber talk very fluently, and she promises to take real good care of your name on our mailing list if you'll just send us a few bucks.

Describing all these people separately doesn't do justice to the way they work together to keep The Factory running at peak efficiency. The fact that they all ended up in the same place at the same time is absolutely — er — *Amazing*. ☺

'IMPROBABLE BESTIARY: The Bump in the Night'

There are monsters and creatures and blood-chilling screechers
Of all sizes, shapes, and descriptions.

There's a spectre whose shriek can make strong men turn weak
And whose groans can give ladies conniptions.

But the worst one of all, one who makes my flesh crawl,

One who brings me to frenzies of fright

Is that grim serenader, that midnight invader:

The thing that goes BUMP in the night.

For it squats in my bedroom, all shadow and creep,
And goes BUMPETY-BUMP while I'm trying to sleep.

As soon as the sun sets and curtains are drawn

The BUMPing begins, and continues till dawn.

I ask for some quiet, but hard as I try,

BUMP-UMPETY-BUMP is the constant reply.

I threaten, I wheedle, I plead and I sob;

The BUMP keeps BUMP-UMPing, for BUMPing's its job.

(I wish I could turn down the thing's volume knob.)

So now, pale, exhausted, I lie here awake

And wish that the BUMP, for variety's sake,

Would make a new noise — any noise except BUMP,

Such as CLATTER, or JANGLE, or TINKLE, or THUMP,

Or HI-DIDDLE-DIDDLE, or CLANG, or KERCHOO,

Or SHOO-BOP-A-DOO-WOP-A-BOOP-OOP-A-DOO.

But all the long night, while I lie in a lump,

Comes BUMPETY-BUMP-UMP-A-RUMP-A-TUMP-BUMP.

There are monsters and creatures with horrorsome features
And shapes to drive men to insanity.

There are zombies who munch on cadavers for lunch,

There are demons who dine on humanity.

But I don't care a bit if the poltergeists flit

Or the hobgoblins caper and leap.

I don't mind if they try it, so long as they're QUIET

At night, when I'm trying to sleep.

— F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

THE CREATION OF THE KHAN

by Kevin Kotowski

art: George Barr



Nighthawks, the author tells us, are creatures of wonder, wheeling and whirling among the streetlamps. If you asked them about him, they'd tell you that he's 29 years old, lives in the Logan Square section of Chicago, works as a copywriter for a major catalog company, and has always been fascinated by Dragons and Oriental women. This is his third published story.

Sometime in the middle of the 12th century, on the banks of the Amur River in Eastern Asia, a girl-child was born to a certain tribal chieftain's wife. She came into the world as a pool of still water on a summer's day, not raging or storm-wracked, but quiet and deathly calm in the moment of birth. In her right fist, she clutched tightly a tiny clump of clotted blood.

When news of the unusual birth was brought to the tent of Dai Sechen (literally Dai the Wise), the shaman of the tribe, he said it was an omen and predicted the child would one day grow to be a warrior of great boldness and cunning.

When reminded that the child was female, he said nothing, only stared with far-away eyes and a thin smile on his frail lips into the flames of his yurt fire, as if hypnotized by the destiny he saw there.

The other members of the tribe laughed off Dai Sechen's prediction with a shake of their heads. For wasn't Dai the Wise getting to be Dai the Old, soon to be Dai the Ancient? True, he'd been a pleasant medicine man, reliable and properly mystic in his younger days. But lately, did he not indulge more than often in the pleasures of khurness? And the odors emanating from his yurt! They were enough to offend even these unsanitary and unwashed nomads. Surely, old Dai was losing his proverbial pebbles at last. The girl-child was named Temujin.

As a youngster, Temujin was different from the other girls. Instead of spending her time learning to cook and sew and playing "what part of your body ails you" with curious boys, she would spend hours throwing war lances at trees and shrubs or go off into the wilderness armed with bow and arrow to hunt small game. As she grew older, she became adept at wrestling, riding, drinking, swearing, and stealing horses.

She also became beautiful. She had long dark hair falling to her waist and high cheekbones and a tiny nose and a soft pouting lower lip and delicate ears. But her most striking feature were her eyes. They were Spring-dreamy cat's eyes that looked through and beyond you. They were the wise pupils of an old man surrounded by the laughing irises of a young warrior. They were eyes that made men tremble and turn their heads rather than meet them, as a dog will turn its head from the gaze of its master. They were fear and desire, death and destruction incarnate.

As can be expected, there was much talk of this strange, beautiful girl with the terrible eyes: talk of curses and madness and the fist of blood at her birth. The only good that could be said of her was that she looked after old Dai Sechen, a task no one desired much since he had begun soiling his blankets at night and had to be spoon fed. Besides, the shaman seemed fond of the girl and one does not fool with a wizard, even an old wizard, if one doesn't want to wake up one morning as a purple toad or a pile of horse dung. No, best to leave well enough alone. The girl would have to marry soon (she was already 12), and even a wizard could not interfere

between a husband and wife. A few dozen beatings would straighten her out, and the lucky fellow was sure to spend many delightful evenings enjoying the bounties of her body. Time, as the Mongol saying goes, heals all wounds and makes right the world.

On a chilly Autumn morning in October, Temujin came to Dai Sechen's tent or yurt. The yurt was constructed of surprisingly light wooden wands covered with the skins of animals. Milk and animal grease had been smeared on the pelts to thicken and strengthen them against the cold and inside a fire dimly lit the darkness. Smoke rose slowly through an opening in the roof. Most people thought Dai Sechen's yurt a dank, rancid-smelling place, but to Temujin it carried the odor of mystery and magic and Dai Sechen's voice was the heartbeat of life itself.

"Welcome, Temujin," said the old man as she entered. It was one of the qualities she liked about the sorcerer. He always called her by name, never "child" or "little one" or "brat." She was made to feel his equal.

"I think I soiled my bedding in my sleep last night," said the wizard. "I am sorry."

"It's no matter," said Temujin. She brought the old man a bowl of khurness and began to clean up the mess.

When she was finished, Temujin propped Dai Sechen up in his blankets, brought him another bowl of khurness and settled herself on the floor of the yurt. She sat across from the wizard, the fire between them.

"So, Temujin, when are you leaving?" asked the old man.

Temujin never asked how Dai Sechen knew things about her that she had never spoken aloud. She was not even surprised anymore when he told her her innermost thoughts.

"Soon," she said.

"Because of that oaf you're to marry?"

She nodded and scratched idly at something crawling in her hair.

"It is woman's place to lie with man."

"Not if I cut his manhood off and feed it to the crows!"

Dai Sechen ignored her remark. He knew it was the hot blood speaking and not the cool mind.

"You have no lover." It was a statement.

She shook her head.

"And you do not desire one."

The cat-like eyes met and held the wizard's own.

"No," Dai Sechen said, "I did not think so. You plan to steal a horse tonight, Belguti's horse, and be far away by dawn?"

The cat's eyes flicked away and down.

"It is a good night for it, Temujin: no moon and if you rode like the wind you could be far away by morning."

"Then all there is to say is good-bye, Dai Sechen." The girl rose to go.

Dai Sechen lifted a gnarled hand. "Sit down, Temujin, if you follow

that plan you would not live a month. You would be hunted down and killed by your own people or some other tribe."

"I have a strong arm and my arrows fly straight," she said defiantly.

The old man sighed. "I once knew a wolf, a good friend of mine, the greatest, fiercest wolf the world had ever seen. He killed when and where he desired and grew greater and more fierce every year. One day, the wolf attacked a herd of horses penned in a corral. Maybe he was hungry or bored or only felt the urge to kill. There were twenty-four horses there and the wolf killed more than half of them before the others trampled him underfoot. Now they tell wonderful tales of this great wolf and how fierce he was, but still he is dead and regrets ever being so foolish as to enter that corral."

Temujin shifted her weight, blinked once, twice into the fire. Dai Sechen coughed and drank deep from the khurness bowl.

"Besides, Temujin, there is a better way."

"How?"

"The Way of the Dragon."

Temujin's head snapped up, her long hair flew back. "Legend," she said.

"Fact," said Dai Sechen.

They sat in silence while the fire burned hotly before them.

"A dragon teaches many things, Temujin."

"And what would the dragon teach me?"

"Who and what you are and could be. It will teach you life and love and their place in your world."

"And how do I follow the Way?"

"The first of three wishes. Think it, do not speak it. Feel it from here," and Dai Sechen touched his heart. "Desire it as you have never desired before."

Temujin stared deep into the fire, her feline eyes narrowed to slits and thought, desired, lusted for the first time in her life.

The fire rose up, the flames shot higher, engulfed her eyes, softly scared the transparentness of her cornea; and she was falling through the sky.

She screamed in fear; but instead of the familiar sound of her voice, a tremendous roaring burst forth from her lungs. She tumbled downward, seeing first the clouds and then the Earth rushing up from below. She screamed once more, and again the deafening roar rose from her throat. Wildly, she flailed her arms, and a pair of wings grabbed air and she felt lifted up. As swiftly as the swiftest arrow is shot from a bow she sped skyward toward the clouds. She felt hot and nauseous, and she vomited. A long tongue of flame shot from her mouth. She screamed once more, froze dead in the air, and plummeted down. Quickly, she flapped her wings and rose up. Too quickly, in seconds she was rushing toward a

cloud bank. Fear snapped her eyes shut for the collision. The clouds parted; they were like water, she discovered, easily cleaved and nothing to be afraid of. Still, she twisted her body away from another bank sliding in front of her. She found the wind would carry her in a straight line or hold her steady if she simply kept her wings free from her sides. By turning her body this way or that, she could change the direction and angle of her flight, and by flapping her wings she could increase her speed.

She hovered, avoided looking below, and took stock of herself. She was a dragon. Specifically, a dragon of the nine resemblances: She had the face of a camel crowned with the horns of a stag and the ears of a bull. Her neck was that of a serpent, and she had a huge crab-like shell of a stomach. Her entire body was covered with the scales of a carp, and the four claws dangling underneath were those of an eagle growing from the pads of a tiger. Her eyes, reflecting the golden sunlight, were no longer those of a cat, but the angry, evil eyes of a devil. Temujin roared in delight. She felt strong, stronger than she ever had before as she swirled among the air currents high above her village. In a sudden rush of exhilaration, she folded her wings and fell as quickly as a hunting hawk, a great cry of freedom bellowing from somewhere deep inside her. She passed low over the yurts, low enough to see the faces of the people, all pointing and yelling and desperately holding on to the terrified horses. She saw her own yurt and her mother shielding her eyes to see better the immense beast passing overhead. The long serpent's neck reared back. Temujin roared once more and with swift wing-beats disappeared over the western horizon.

She had long ago decided in which direction she would flee once she left the village. For the Mongols knew that to the north was cold and hunger and all paths east ended in a great body of water impossible to cross. To the south lay the wall and many soldiers to defend it. But the west went on and on, and no Mongol had ever journeyed afar in that direction, at least no Mongol that ever came back to tell of his journey. For the West was rumored to be the home of the Borjigun, or blue-eyed men, a people believed to be blood-kin to the gods and not to be taken lightly. But to this young girl with the hero's heart, the danger of such a journey only made it more attractive, an adventure to be enjoyed rather than feared, a trek away from the familiar and despised into the magical unknown.

And in a body such as this! Who would not welcome a dragon, especially a dragon of the resemblances? For wasn't this dragon the chief of the four spiritual animals? More powerful than the ling (an animal resembling a cross between a giraffe and a unicorn), more benevolent than the kuei (a tortoise-like creature), more sought after as a protector of the weak and oppressed than the feng (a fabulous bird related to the phoenix). Surely, Temujin would be honored and blessed wherever she

finally settled — even if it was to her own village she eventually returned. But there was so much to see and do and learn before that day! And the land of the Borjigun was beckoning. . . .

Temujin, the dragon of the nine resemblances, flew for many days and nights; and her passage cast a ghostly shadow upon the Earth.

One morning, as the dawn rose brilliant and thunderous from behind her, Temujin spied a small yurt far below. It was of a type she had never seen before. It seemed permanent and unyielding and looked to be made of dried mud and straw. Grain grew in wavering fields all about the house, and Temujin sensed the presence of men. She dove down to investigate, coming to rest a few yards from the opening of the yurt.

At the sight of the dragon perched near his front door, the owner of the farm, his wife, four sons, three daughters, and two grandchildren fled screaming across their fields. Temujin, alarmed, gave chase, searching this way and that for the danger that seemed so apparent to these people. She would protect and defend them from whatever it was, as a dragon must or lose its powers forever. She swooped low over the fleeing peasants and gently plucked the oldest from the ground. The man screamed and fainted. Still she could see no danger. She dropped low again, intending to scoop up another of the people, a girl this time, who looked to be about Temujin's age. The girl fell to the ground and clawed the dirt.

What was wrong? Temujin thought. *What were they afraid of?* The answer stunned her when it came. They were afraid of her. And for the first time she felt the faint stirring of pleasure that power and control over others brings.

Temujin placed the unconscious man on a bed of grain and glided up to ponder the situation. Clearly, she needed a voice. For if the sight of her scared these people, then the dragon-call would surely frighten them to death. But if she could talk to them, explain to them, then perhaps all could be made well. She realized she needed Dai Sechen. In a flash, she was back in his yurt, before the fire, the old wizard sitting across from her, his ever-present khurness bowl pressed to his lips.

"Well, Temujin, how have you been?" said the old man and smiled. The smile caused his eyes to narrow and the wrinkles at their corners to become more evident.

"I have been well, Dai Sechen. And you?"

"Oh, alright. It is hard to be old. Much better to be young."

Temujin nodded her agreement.

"Tell me, Temujin, what have you learned on your journeys?"

"Fear," Temujin said without hesitation.

"It is good to learn fear."

"Dai Sechen — " Temujin began, but stopped when Dai raised his hands.

"The second of three wishes," Dai said and pointed to the fire.

Temujin gazed deep into the blaze, felt its heat racing up her legs, her arms, across her face to become liquid pools of flame centered in her retinac. She felt choked, smothered in the heat, then opened her mouth to cry out and found herself once more a dragon gliding through the clouds high above the village. She checked her directions and in a flash was gone, racing the sun on its journey toward the west.

On and on she flew, a wraith faintly glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, a specter momentarily blotting the stars from sight.

In time, Temujin came once more to the yurt of the farmers she had previously visited. Cautiously, she hovered above the roof and called out a greeting. There was no answer. Temujin settled herself in front of the door and with one great eye peered into the darkness inside. The yurt was deserted. The farmer and his family had run off.

Temujin sighed and took to the air. Where should she go? Return to her village and ask Dai Sechen's advice or travel on?

She chose to fly on. Surely there would be another yurt with hardier people who would welcome her. She flew ever westward, following the meandering course of a river. The river led her to a village of yurts so vast she could not count them all. There were people and horses and oxen pulling carts loaded with goods. Boats of all shapes and sizes plied the waters of the river, and a great din rose high above the huge village. It was a treasure beyond Temujin's wildest dreams. The yurts were packed close together and the entire village was surrounded by a stone wall.

Temujin dropped down, her head turning from side to side, searching for a place to safely settle the bulk of her body. She was just above and outside the wall when the first arrow bounced off her armor. It was soon followed by a second and a third, and then the sky was filled with arrows and spears and throwing axes. Temujin reacted as any Mongol would. She fought back. Her talons lashed out and struck the wall, sending men and stone crashing down. She roared in anger, and still the arrows flew. The bile rose in her throat, and she spat a billowing sheet of flame from her mouth. The yurts within burst into fire, and the flames leaped in panic from one house to another.

Temujin rose high above the city. An occasional arrow still arched up from below but fell far short of its mark.

"I come in friendship!" Temujin bellowed. "And this is how you greet friends, with arrows and spears! I ought to destroy you all!"

The dragon trembled in anger, and then Temujin felt sick and weary. She just wanted to be away from here, away from these people who treated the magical and generous with disdain. In a flash, she was back in Dai Sechen's yurt, sitting across from the wizard, the fire crackling between them.

"Ah, Temujin, it is good to see you again," Dai Sechen said. "I was

beginning to wonder what had happened to you."

Temujin still trembled and shivered with rage.

"You are cold, Temujin? Would you like a blanket perhaps?"

The girl willed her body still.

"No, thank you; I am fine."

"Good, now tell me, what have you learned on your journeys?"

"Hate!" said Temujin fiercely.

"Well, fear and hate go hand in hand. It is good for you to know these things."

Temujin shrugged.

"But, I think you must learn one more lesson. Something greater than fear and hate combined."

"No!" Temujin shouted. "I travel no more! I leave here tonight."

"But in which shape?" asked the old wizard.

"In my own!"

Dai Sechen sighed. "You are so young, Temujin. Try the Way once more. Do not take the coward's path. You were born to challenge the world. Do not let yourself be beaten by it."

Temujin closed her eyes, the sharpness of her breathing filled the yurt. Dai Sechen sipped from his khurness bowl. A moment passed and Temujin's eyes fluttered open.

"One last time, Dai Sechen, the third and final wish. Then no more."

Dai Sechen nodded.

The girl bent forward, the ends of her hair danced just above the flames. She could see the embers burning brightly in the center of the blaze, could feel the blood racing through her body, the shimmering pain coursing along the optic nerve, flowing somewhere into her head like a stream of oil set aflame, and then she was gone, sailing among cool moon-lit clouds while a world at peace slumbered below.

No one marked the passing of the dragon save perhaps a shepherd or two who made up stories of large winged beasts that glided among the heavens and devoured men in the middle of the terror-filled night.

Temujin flew for many days and nights until she reached the river and the scorched city on its banks.

At her approach, horns were sounded and soldiers rushed to and fro manning the walls and towers with bows drawn and spears at the ready. Temujin came to rest before the main gate, safely out of arrow range.

"Send someone to talk," she called and her voice was like the sweet clanging of sword upon shield.

There was commotion on the walls, and then the gate opened and a single young man rode forth.

At sight of him, Temujin drew in her breath. For he was as handsome as she was beautiful. His body was well-muscled and his face clean-shaven. He had the deepest blue eyes she'd ever seen and his hair

was the color of sand. He rode tall and erect on a white stallion and carried no weapons save a sword. He reined in his horse about three or four yards in front of the dragon.

"I have come," Temujin said, "to aid you and your people. I mean you no harm."

"Be gone, demon," shouted the young man. "I be of the clan of George and mighty warriors are we, beloved of the Lord God, Jesus Christ." The boy plucked a wooden cross from under his jerkin and held it high aloft.

Temujin assumed it was a talisman of some sort. She too often carried an amulet to ward off evil.

"The fame of the George is well-known," Temujin lied, "and I have come not to dispute it but to honor it."

The young man was not swayed.

"Be gone, worm, before I strike your head from your body."

"Fear not, George," the dragon said mildly, "I mean you no harm," and Temujin changed from the beast to the beauty.

At the sight of the young girl the warrior gasped.

"You see, George, all is not what it seems." Temujin smiled up into the George's blue eyes.

The young man hesitated, but only for an instant. "Demon, Devil, Son of Satan," he cried, "be gone," and he brought the sword down in a glittering arc.

Temujin instinctively threw up her hands and twisted her body away. The sword missed its mark and slashed deeply into her right hand.

Quickly, Temujin resumed her dragon shape, knocked the rider from his horse and lifted him up in her bloodied, talon-tipped paw.

For a long time she held the young man in her fist while he shivered and begged for mercy. Then she placed him gently on the ground and slowly rose in the air, not once looking behind her.

She flew aimlessly and without direction before willing herself back to Dai Sechen's yurt.

"Ho, Temujin," said the wizard as she appeared before him, "I see you have injured yourself."

Temujin looked down and closed her fist tightly over the still bleeding wound.

"It is nothing, Dai Sechen," she said.

"No, I suppose not," said the wizard and busied himself rearranging the blankets at his side.

"I have learned something new, Dai Sechen."

The wizard pulled the blankets closer. "What is that?"

"Love," Temujin whispered.

"And what of love?" asked Dai Sechen.

The girl slowly held up her hand, the rivulets of bright blood ran down her arm.

"Ahhh," said the wizard and looked away.

"Tell me, Dai Sechen, why are there only three wishes to the Way?"

The wizard scratched an eyebrow, spat into the fire and looked up into Temujin's eyes. They were icy cold, devoid of all warmth and feeling.

"Because no one has ever asked for a fourth wish."

"I am asking," Temujin said, her voice barely audible.


"You wish to become a dragon once more, Temujin?"

Temujin shook her head. "No, something much more dangerous than a dragon, Dai Sechen."

Temujin gazed into the fire. It was as if there were a tiny sun growing there, a shapeless mass of flame, hot enough to consume the world. She felt herself falling into the fire, into the sun, could feel her flesh being stripped from her body, exposing her insides, her bones, her soul. She was one with the fire, a leaping tongue of flame, strong and powerful and perfect. She felt herself transformed, and then the sun exploded beneath her eyelids.

Word traveled quickly throughout the village of the young man who had emerged from Dai Sechen's yurt. First the children and then the men and women gathered about him. He stood tall and well-muscled and had deep sky-blue eyes that glowed with an inner light of their own.

The old wizard stood beside the young man. "Behold your new khan," Dai Sechen said. "A khan who shall lead you to a glory greater than any you can imagine. A khan the whole world will fear. Genghis Khan, the khan of khans."

But Temujin, Genghis Khan, hardly heard a word the wizard said, but stood gazing far-off into the west, fingering a deep scar on the palm of his right hand, a sad smile playing lightly over his lips. 

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DARKNESS COMES RATTLING

by Sheila Finch-Rayner

art: Jim Bearcloud

Sheila Finch-Rayner is a relatively new writer, who has previously sold to Fantasy Book and Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. This is her first sale to Amazing. She was born in England, did graduate work in America in medieval literature, and now teaches creative writing and science fiction at El Camino College. She has also published stories and poems in literary magazines.

Still groggy from the vortex of transfer, Moli Pak stepped through the portal and turned her ankle.

Kati Hiller heard her oath, and swallowed down her own nausea to hurry through. "Are you okay?"

"Damned uneven ground," Moli muttered, rubbing her ankle. Her skinsuit flashed silver in the rising sun; she wore the hood thrown back with the careless assurance of experience, and her short grey hair lifted slightly off her temples in the dawn breeze. She marked the vanished portal's position with a small cross of white stones.

Kati eased the counter out of her pocket and glanced around. They had arrived in a dry stream bed, still heavy with shadows, and rock banks rose higher than her head on both sides. No matter how many transfers she might make, she thought, there would always be something special about that first moment in another time.

The air in the stream bed was cool and laced with the pungency of wild herbs and the darker scent of underground water. She would need to climb one of the cliffs to get a good look at the area. No use expecting Moli to do it. Even without the excuse of a turned ankle, she always required her assistants to do the hard work. When the schedule had been posted listing Kati as sole assistant to Professor Pak on this trip, the senior assistants had laughed and wished her luck keeping the great biochemist happy. But Kati knew it was a great opportunity, and she was determined to do a good job.

"I'm going to take a reading," Kati said.

Moli grunted. She was checking her satchel, setting the plastipouches in neat piles on a flat boulder. Then came the tools for digging and cutting when she found what she was looking for — *Datura inoxia*, a species of hallucinogenic weed that had disappeared in the devastation at the end of the twentieth century.

She had made a career of tracking down and retrieving the lost, naturally occurring hallucinogens of the ancient world. The work was not



without its hazards. Anything taken from the past, however microscopic, ran the risk of creating a paradox, disturbing the time lines and altering their own present in unforeseen ways. But Moli was an expert risk-taker, specializing in snatching plants at the very edge of their fated disappearance or destruction, so that their absence would not change the future. Kati had read her work long before she had advanced enough at the uni to serve as her assistant: *Lophophoria williamsii*, seized moments before it was due to be consumed by a river of volcanic lava; the mushroom, *Psilocybe mexicana*, rescued from the yawning maw of an earthquake.

But this was the most dangerous yet, for the *Datura* had been found at a time locus only days before radiation from the first of the planet's last wars had contaminated the area.

Kati began to climb, excitement and nervousness combining to clumsy her movements. Less assured than her professor, she left the hood and face mask in place. The skinsuit was lightweight and close-fitting and did not restrict her movements. Nevertheless, she was puffing by the time she reached the top. Transfer portals always had to be located in uninhabited places to minimize disturbance of the neighboring electrical fields. She was used to that. But it was the first time she had seen the high desert country, and it was uncomfortable, and hot. It stretched umber and gold in all directions. Grey-white boulders tumbled over the sand just below her vantage point, like piles of rubble left by the destruction of a giant's house. Stunted bushes raised black spines under the already-punishing sun, and all of it shimmering in the heat rising off the desert floor.

She slid the counter out of its case and held it in her palm. The counter ticked dryly to itself with its insect voice, weighing the threat of death and deciding it was not yet critical.

She was about to rejoin Moli when a blur of movement caught her eye, a hundred metres away on the other side of the dry stream. She stood very still, waiting for the bird or creature to show itself. Only the heated air moved; the desert seemed empty. A thousand years ago, when the world's population had been much greater, only a few had lived in this desert area of what had been known at the time as the Emerikan continent. They had been the lucky ones. She replaced the counter in her pocket and scrambled back down the bank, sliding on the loose gravel.

"Well?" Moli demanded as Kati slithered to a halt at her feet, showering sand on the satchel which had been repacked.

"Radiation is tolerable yet."

The small brush-fire wars had already begun, and would within a week lead to global involvement. Already the darkness that would last for the next two hundred years was spreading across the face of the world.

Moli carefully dusted off the satchel and hoisted it to her shoulder. "Come along then."

Their boots crunched in the small pebbles. Kati's face mask misted

over. She made a slight adjustment to the controls at her belt so it would deal with the heat more efficiently. Then, since the counter had confirmed their margin of safety, she followed Moli's example and pushed hood and mask back completely. They walked a hundred paces down the winding path of the dry bed, and the walls on either side sank away till they rounded a boulder and saw a cleft where a tributary fed into the larger stream in the rainy season.

"I have to rest this damned ankle," Moli said. "Over there, under that little overhanging cliff, there'll be some shade."

For a moment, something flickered at the edge of Kati's vision. She shaded her eyes and waited, not anxious to confront one of the dangerous-looking predators she had learned to recognize from the infocubes. But the desert lay motionless in the heat.

Moli limped ahead scowling. Reaching the cliff, she slumped down in the meagre shade. Kati waited while she unfolded the map the robot chronoprobe had made and studied it.

"Actually, this mightn't be such a bad spot." Moli looked up at the jumble of boulders behind them. "But you'll have to do the climbing."

Kati nodded.

"Remember what we're looking for. Dark green leaves. White bells on the mature plant."

"I know, Moli. I studied the —"

"Get a *good* specimen. And don't waste time. We've got a little under sixty minutes."

"Really, I don't intend —"

"Fine." Moli reached a hand to Kati's dark brown curls and ruffled them with an affection that took the sting out of her gruff tone. "Off you go then."

She held out the satchel, and Kati gave her the counter. The skinsuits offered protection against most things, including low-level radiation, but could not save them from the devastation that was coming. Kati knew what that was going to be like. She had started out as a student of early history, but the field trips have been too depressing. So she had switched to biochemistry, only to find that Moli Pak hunted in the same dangerous periods as her history professors relished.

She headed up the narrow canyon formed by the tributary. The ground was soft and spongy underfoot; and small-leaved things clung obstinately to life in the shadow of larger, thorny skeletons, like an emblem of those who had managed to survive the wars, she thought, somehow staying alive through all the pain, salvaging what they could of humanity through the dark centuries until the time of rebuilding came. Her own world, comfortable and secure, owed them a great debt. Indeed, its roots went deep into that reservoir of endurance, like the roots of these tiny plants tapping into hidden water.

She scanned the area for a glimpse of *Datura*, which, Moli had explained in seminar, thrived in these conditions. The trail became steeper; and she climbed it on all fours, the satchel hampering her. Twice she lost her footing and slid down several metres. She was glad the skinsuit protected her from skinned knees and gravel-burned hands. There were no *Datura* plants in sight.

Above her head, a flat-topped rock reared up. It would provide a good vantage point from which to spot the elusive plants, if there were any around. Steadying the toe of one boot into a crack in the lower part of the rock, she reached as high as possible and grasped a slight indentation.

An ominous rattling froze her in place.

The infocubes had warned of the presence of poisonous snakes in this desert, in particular the family, *Crotalidae*, with horny, interlocking tail joints that gave them their name in this period: rattlers. She knew logically that she was safe in her skinsuit. Even so, fear churned in her stomach.

But the rattling had a pronounced rhythm. This fact seeped into her awareness, driving out the fear. She tightened her fingers into the chinks and pulled herself cautiously up until her eyes were above the top of the boulder.

A half-naked young man stood in a sun-filled open space between the boulders. He wore a leather skirt embroidered with long, greyish-brown feathers. He was shaking an odd-shaped stick in his right hand, with some kind of swelling at the top. It too was decorated with feathers and plaited strips of something she could not identify. His eyes were half closed in concentration.

Then he saw Kati's face above the boulder and stopped rattling.

She had violated Rule Three of field work: *Do not allow yourself to be seen*. But it was too late to remember that. Guilt at the clumsy way she had handled it gave way to fascination as she stared at the first human in another time that she had ever met. She pulled herself to the top of the boulder and sat looking at him. He did not move.

"Hello." Her voice emerged shakily in the silence. The important thing was to make him think it was perfectly normal for her to be there, and then to exit as fast as possible.

"I was just looking for —" she found she could not remember the familiar name for *Datura* in this time period. "— for wildflowers," she finished.

"You're six months too late," he said, and she was glad she had once had to learn Old Inglis; he inflected the words in a way that made them difficult to catch.

She laughed nervously. "So that's why I haven't found any!"

She should have known better than to make a stupid mistake like that. Lucky that Moli Pak had not heard it. The man was staring at her, and she

was suddenly thankful she had not replaced the mask; she must look bizarre enough to him already. He frowned. He was still holding the rattle, as though ready to resume the moment her interruption faded.

"Actually, I wanted a specific plant," she said. "With dark green leaves and little white flowers." But what if the hallucinogens had been illegal in this period? She could not remember that, either. She swallowed. "Don't let me stop whatever you were doing. I'll leave in a minute."

"Why'd you come to me?" he demanded.

"Why?"

"This is White Cloud's rattle. You heard him make it speak often enough. You going to leave because I ain't got a right to it?"

Obviously she was expected to say something in reply to this. But what? She played for time. "What's your name?"

Tension drained swiftly out of him. He lowered his arm. "John Smallrain."

"Well, John Smallrain, my name is Kati Hiller."

That was not right, apparently, because he frowned again. She lowered herself to the sandy depression where he was standing. "You can call me Kati."

His eyes held hers in a dark, unblinking gaze. "There's no one left to make White Cloud's rattle speak."

"I thought you were doing rather well."

"You making fun of me?"

"No. Truly. But tell me the problem. Help me understand." At the foot of the high boulder that she had scaled there was a narrow ledge, a natural bench. She patted it. "Sit down and talk to me."

Reluctantly, it seemed to her, he accepted the offer. For a while he was silent, gazing at the distant line of brown hills.

"White man's ways've made my people sick. But they don't remember the old ways. Someone better do something soon, or we'll croak. White Cloud should've passed his power to me, his sister's boy. But I'm too late."

She recoiled from the anguish in his voice. "What is it?"

"Bus from L.A. broke down outside Kingman. Gave right up outside the town. No reason at all. Just wouldn't start again. I got here an hour after the old man died."

"I don't understand."

"I should've come back before!" he said fiercely. "And maybe I should've never gone in the first place. But who stays in this Godforsaken place? All the guys say, 'When you get out of high school get off the reservation and get out to the West Coast.' I didn't come back, that's all."

Half the words had not been on the infocubes, but she could understand the bitterness in them. "You can help your people now, if that's what you want. It's not too late."

That at least had to be true. The Emerinds of this desert were survivors. She had read their story many times.

"I can't heal people unless I'm healed first. And the old man was the only one who could do it. Let's face it. I should've stayed in L.A."

"What were you doing when I interrupted?"

He gave a short laugh. "More crazy nonsense. I had some dumb idea I'd summon up a spirit or something — get me a vision, a dream. But who'd I be kidding? I can't do shit for my people. We're all at the end of the line, white man, red, black, everybody."

Shivering in spite of the heat, she asked, "What do you mean?"

"Come on! Read the papers. Nukes, border wars, that Israeli bomb — What d'you think it means?"

She should take no part in this conversation. It was exactly what the field-prep courses warned against. But still —

"Your people are supposed to be survivors."

He looked at her curiously for a moment. "So the old men in the pueblo say. I don't believe it. Isn't a medicine man in the world can shield us from radiation?"

"You mustn't say that. The world doesn't end like that."

"How come you're so certain?"

She had said more than she had intended. There were penalties for contaminating another time with information from its future. Worse, she could alter the time lines between the past and her own present, perhaps even ensuring she would have no world to return to at all. Yet the history was quite clear. Around the planet, isolated pockets of survivors had hung on. They were the hope of the future, which could not exist without them. They had to survive.

"You *have* to help your people, John," she said. "Can't you persuade them it would be safer in the mountains?"

"No use, Ka-dee. I don't have no visions, no songs. And I couldn't fake it. I wouldn't do that to my people. They've been lied to too much already."

She blinked back a hot sting of tears, and swatted at her eyes impatiently. Crying was an inappropriate response. There must be something she could do? But *doing* anything at all in the past was strictly forbidden.

"Besides," he added, removing his beaded skirt and feathered leggings, "anyone survives this mess that's coming will have it worse than those who get it right off. I wouldn't be doing them no favor."

"But what about the future?" she cried.

From a knapsack half-hidden under a leafless bush he produced a pair of jeans, patched and faded. The dark chest vanished under a plaid shirt. Overhead, large white puffs of cloud drifted on the deep blue vault of the sky. In the west, rain fell, gleaming like a silver comb as it passed across the mesa. Was it already contaminated, she wondered?

"Kati!"

Abruptly, she remembered Moli Pak, waiting under the cliff. She had forgotten all about her search for *Datura* plants.

"Who's that?" He looked up from tying bootlaces.

"Come with me," she said, standing up suddenly. "There's someone up there who might know what to do." Moli was not a historian, but surely she would understand.

"Hey, look. Thanks. But I got a bus to catch." He eased the knapsack over his shoulder. "I'm going to hole out in a bar on the Sunset Strip. Something happens, I'll be too damn drunk to know."

She stood up smoothing out the skinsuit. "It's not you I'm worrying about, John Smallrain."

He looked up at her oddly. She was aware of how the skinsuit flashed in the sun.

"Who are you?"

She said nothing.

"Sexy outfit you got. It'd be far out even in L.A."

She indicated the boulder. He held his ground, his eyes following the curves of the skinsuit. She swallowed hard.

"Yes. Well. Maybe you'd like to find out how sexy?"

"You kidding? But like I told you, I ain't got the time."

"It wouldn't take long." She clenched her fingers to stop the trembling. "Hurry. There's a good place just over the top here."

He hesitated for a moment longer. Then he shrugged and scaled the rock in a quick, smooth motion. She followed, rather more clumsily.

Moli Pak looked up as the stones rattled down to her feet. Now that the sun was high in the sky, there was little shade, and she had drawn up the hood and face mask for protection. Irritation grated in her voice.

"It's about time! Where have you been? Did you find the —" She froze.

John Smallrain stopped too. For a moment, Kati saw her professor as he must be seeing her, a strange, silver-skinned creature with huge glassy eyes. Then he turned to Kati.

"Hallucinating, I guess. Nothing to eat since L.A. And the smoke is slow acting."

"Did you find the *Datura*?"

"This is more important."

"More important?" Moli spat angrily. She seemed on the verge of saying more. Then her gaze moved back to John Smallrain. Her eyes hardened. She switched to a higher level of Inglis, one they spoke only in the lab or the classroom, closing him out. "Do you realize how much this is costing? And we've only got twenty minutes left on the auto-retrieval system. Someone miscalculated. When I get back and find out who's responsible —"

"Moli, listen. Something's gone terribly wrong. Unless we find a

solution, there'll be no survivors. The Emerinds will be wiped out, just like everybody else."

"No survivors? Nonsense. We know from their legends a shaman led them to safety."

Kati pointed at John Smallrain. "This is their shaman. And he's giving up."

"Him?" Moli said acidly. "You must have made a mistake."

"No mistake. He doesn't think he can do it. The bus broke down and he got here too late to get the power."

"Well, with or without the *Datura* we have to get back. We can't risk staying any longer. Besides, it was probably another tribe."

"If this is a medicine dream," John said, "it ain't like any I ever heard about."

Moli glared at him. She stood up, grunting as she put her full weight on the twisted ankle. "Damn! It'll take us half an hour to get to the portal. History will have to take care of itself. You know the rules. We can't interfere."

"But something's gone wrong."

"Wait a minute." Moli glanced back at the man. "What did you say happened?"

"His bus just stopped outside Kingman, and —"

"The bus just stopped. Great Mother!" Moli covered her eyes with a silvered hand. "Not only did they miscalculate the time, they warped us in too close to a road. We must have blown the electrical circuits on his bus. Who knows what other damage we might have done? So what! Another few days and it won't matter."

"But it'll be our fault if he doesn't save his people," Kati insisted. "Moli, he's the one. I know."

Moli glowered at the man as if she had suddenly surprised an unpleasant bug among her neat, clean laboratory equipment. She dropped back down two levels of Inglis. "What did you think you were going to do for your people, anyway?"

He returned her gaze without blinking. "We got a legend. 'When the world comes to an end, the Great Spirit's children gather at the navel of the Earth and survive.'"

"Navel of the —"

He hooked a thumb over his shoulder at the purple smear on the eastern horizon. "Up in them mountains."

"Shit," Moli said softly. "We've created a paradox."

She stared up at the sky, busy with her thoughts.

"We have to *do* something —"

"You may be right," she said. "I wonder if a second interference would cancel out the first? Great Mother! We need a physicist here, not a biochemist."

Kati turned to John Smallrain. "What would you need to make you a real shaman? What would you have to do before you could lead your people to safety?"

"I told you. Before a shaman gets his power, he needs a healing ceremony done over him by another shaman. He's got to die and be re-born. But there ain't anybody left can do it now the old man's dead."

"Then we'll have to do it ourselves. You tell us what you need, and we'll do it."

She pulled her hood and face mask up against the invisible, rattling death that was creeping toward them all.

"All the playacting in the world's not going to give him the supernatural powers he thinks he needs," Moli grumbled.

But she had not said no.

Kati turned back to confront the man and saw his eyes widen. "Tell me what you want me to do, John."

"I don't have no idea."

"Then make it up!"

His lips parted as if he were about to make another argument. Then the sun came out from behind a cloud that had temporarily eclipsed it and struck a reflection off the plastiglass of her face mask, lighting his face with a sudden brilliance. He covered his eyes with shaking fingers.

"I think we dig a hole in the ground for my grave," he said.

Together, using the tools from Moli's satchel, they dug a shallow grave. The earth was surprisingly moist and easy to work. When it was deep enough for a man to lie in, he lay on his side with knees drawn up to his chin.

"Now what?"

"I sing something. I don't know what."

"Who knows what this mess is doing to the time lines?" Moli complained.

"Can't you remember anything? You must remember some song you learned as a child?"

"I took a course at City College, once. One of them 'ethnic studies.' There was a poem —"

"Say it."

"In the great night —"

"Go on!" She almost screamed at him. Time was running like water through their fingers while he hesitated.

"In the great night my heart will go out.

Toward me the darkness comes rattling.

In the great night my heart will go out."

"Good. Now what?"

"You cover me with earth."

Hurriedly, she scooped soil and gravel and showered it on him, cover-

ing him with a thin, reddish-brown shroud. At some point, she realized Moli had joined her, sprinkling handfuls of sand over his face and hands, leaving just a small space for him to breathe.

"What next?"

He blew away a few loose clods of dirt that threatened to fall into his mouth. "You got to tell the myths over me, beginning with the creation."

Aghast, she stared at Moli. "I don't know any myths."

"And you were a history student?" Moli fumed. "Well, I'll make one up for you! In the Beginning there were atoms and molecules, particles of star dust whirling around each other in a cosmic dance. And there was no life yet in the void, only emptiness and fiery gases where the stars kindled. And planets formed, and moons, and the hot gas cooled. And rivers and oceans and lakes covered the world. Then the cosmos became conscious of itself and produced life. And life produced *Homo sapiens*, with the power both to create and destroy, to wound and to heal again. And if someone doesn't lead the Emerind people of this region up into the mountains where their legends tell them to go at the time of the end of the world, there'll be no survivors and history will be mightily confounded."

There was silence when Moli finished. Her voice had risen at the end of her mythmaking, startling a small bird that had been drowsing in the fronds of the stunted palm tree. It chirped shrilly, fluttering above the makeshift grave. John Smallrain stared thoughtfully at it. In the distance, lightning flashed and thunder spoke of rain in the mountains. Then he freed himself of the clinging earth and stood up. Before he stepped out of the hole, he bent down and took a handful of the red soil to smear on his brow and cheekbones.

"There," Moli said. "We've made a real shaman. But who knows what else we've done?"

Kati gathered up the satchel, shoving the counter into her pocket. She held out her arm to the older woman. "We had to take the risk. Lean on me. I'll get us back to the portal."

Moli shook her head. "Don't need it. Let's get out of here."

"There's something still to do," Smallrain said.

They waited while he rummaged in his knapsack, lying where he had dropped it under the palm tree. He came back holding out a rank smelling, dark-leaved plant with shrivelling white bells.

"Jimson weed," he said. "Medicine smoke. This what you said you were looking for?"

Kati took the plant and put it carefully into one of the plastipouches in Moli's satchel. "Thank you."

"I never believed the old man's stories until now."

"Good," Moli said sourly. "Let's hope it helps."

"You testing me, old woman?"

"Great Mother, no." Moli limped forward. "Time's running out too

fast for that. From now on, you're on your own, Shaman."

In the distance, the portal had begun to shimmer, a blue luminescence drawing them back to their own time. Kati felt a stab of conscience. They had made him believe a lie. She touched his arm briefly. "Good luck."

"Hey." He frowned at her, his face a fierce red-daubed mask incongruous above the worn plaid. "You ain't leaving now?"

"Yes."

"No! I mean — this ritual stuff, it's okay. I'm grateful. But, but — look, I'm going to need more than mumbo jumbo, right?"

"What are you saying?" She kept moving.

"Our legends tell in the time of darkness spirits come to save us. It don't make no difference if they ain't really spirits."

Moli Pak stood already in the portal's glow beckoning to her.

"You know what's going to *happen*," he said. "What it's going to be like."

"Well —"

"Tell me what to do next."

"You told me what you have to do next."

"Shit! And after I get 'em up in the hills? Then what? There's stuff I have to *know*."

She moved away from him. He kept pace with her.

"Tell me about radiation. Contamination. Dammit! There must be drugs — give me what I need to know!"

She hesitated, a step away from the portal. Moli grabbed her arm, dragging her into its sphere.

"John," she said as gently as she could. "*I can't*."

"Yeah. I know. You gotta go back to your own time. I figured that much out. But you got to tell me *something*."

History lessons of the dark years unrolled in her mind — the pain, the disease, the death. But she could not tell him. He was going to one of the few right places, where altitude and prevailing weather patterns would shelter his people from most of the radiation. And she dared not tell him that, either.

She felt the pull of transfer beginning.

"Wait!" His hand shot out to hold her back. It slid right through her arm. "*Tell me . . .*"

His voice dwindled to a whisper.

You'll think of something," she said. "You have to."

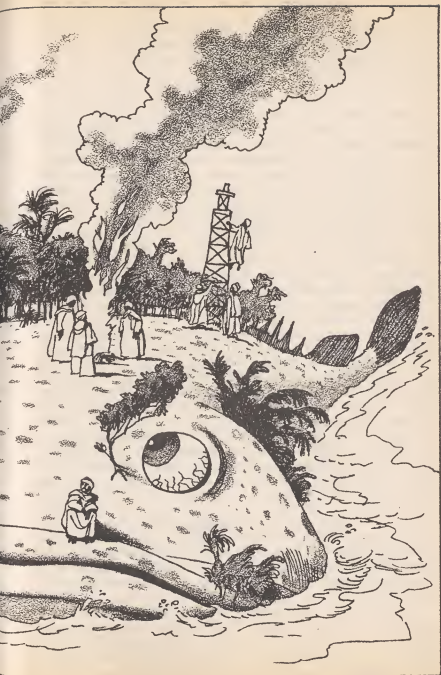


ADVENTURES IN UNHISTORY: WHERE DID SINDBAD SAIL?

by Avram Davidson

art Jack Gaughan





Mr. Davidson won a Hugo award for "*Or All the Seas with Oysters*," an Edgar for "*The Affair at Lahore Cantonment*," and two Howards, for "*Naples*" and *The Enquiries of Dr. Esterhazy*.

It may be that the reply of many is, Who cares? And it lieth not in my power to make anyone care by force or constraint, but it may be I may be able to awaken the interest of those whose interests slumber. May it be. If we do not all recall to mind instantly the stories of Paul Bunyan the giant lumberjack of the North Woods, at least, I am sure, we have all heard of them and of him. I believe that there exists in the minds of all of us, shall I say a suspicion, that Paul Bunyan did not really own a big blue ox named Babe who measured — was it forty axe handles and a plug of chewing-tobacco between the horns? We suspect, I think, that no one else did, either — though, to be sure, it is "the plug of chewing-tobacco" which adds the touch of verisimilitude to what is an otherwise, if not bald, certainly an unconvincing narrative. But that does not in any way mean that there was never a Paul Bunyan, that there are no oxen, no axe-handles, no chewing-tobacco, no cakes and ale, and certainly not that there are no North Woods.

However, I brought in Paul Bunyan just by way of example. The story or stories of Sindbad the Sailor, to give him his most common name in our English language, are Something Else: and it is my premise that Sindbad did not just sail off on a Sea of Dreams, but onto one which may be (if we take the trouble) mapped and charted and its islands and its shores more or less . . . perhaps . . . be pointed out with the forefinger of the hand. The landfalls of Ulysses, or Odysseus, in *The Odyssey*, though much discussed, leave us much perplexed: but *The Thousand and One Nights*, or *The Arabian Nights* (*Alf Layla wa-Layla*, in the original), although their voyages encompass much larger seas, date from much later days; and whatever dates these may be, one thing is certain sure: the adventures alleged of Sindbad were adventures in a time and realm of writing. And those of *The Odyssey* were not. Let us not, of course, make the mistakes made by many in the past. That true things may be written in a book cannot make true all things written in all books. Nor, to take the tally and turn it over, does one lie or a hundred lies prove King David right when he said in his sorrow, "All men are liars." In a way (partly to correct myself) Sindbad did sail off on a Sea of Dreams: but these dreams were based on fact.

It may be appropriate to begin with the description of the house of Sindbad in his years of retirement. The source is the Story of Es-Sindibad of the Sea, from *The Arabian Nights*; the scene is the city of Baghdad: "... a handsome mansion, presenting an appearance of joy and

majesty . . . a grand chamber, in which [were] noblemen and great lords; and in it were all kinds of flowers, and all kinds of sweet scents, and varieties of dried and fresh fruits, together with abundance of exquisite viands, and beverage prepared from the fruits of the choicest grape-vines. In it were also instruments of music and mirth, and varieties of beautiful slave-girls, all ranged in proper order." And here is the description of old Sindbad himself:

"... at the upper end of that chamber was a great and venerable man, in the sides of whose beard grey hairs had begun to appear. He was of handsome form, comely in countenance, with an aspect of gravity, and dignity and majesty and stateliness."

Hardly some drunken and reprobate old sea-dog, telling tall stories in return for a free beer and a bucket of slops, is it? We are in the World of the Arabian Nights, in which the real and the ideal mingle side by side. Whatever the actual date of the story — and in fact it would seem impossible not only to "assign an actual date" to it but even to define what is meant by the "actual date" — it contains within it some actual memories of the Golden Age of Al-Islam, an age of tolerance and toleration, of prosperity and welcome contact with the outside world, a world in itself very wide-ranging, with commerce unchecked by ignorance or avarice: and of this world the *de facto* capital is Baghdad, successor to Babylon, as yet unravished by the Mongol hordes, and of which the *de facto* ruler is the legendary Caliph Haroun al-Rashid . . . whose name, it may be said, translates as Aaron the Righteous.* Wealth is appreciated, poverty is understood, both being the gifts assigned by the infinite wisdom of — but allow me to give the epigraph itself.

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Praise be to God, the Beneficent King, the Creator of the Universe, Who hath raised up the heavens without pillars, and spread out the earth as a bed; and blessing and peace be upon the lord of apostles, our Lord and our master Mohammed, and his Family; blessing and peace, enduring and constant, unto the day of judgement.

To proceed: — The lives of former generations are a lesson to posterity; that a man may review the remarkable events which have happened to others, and be admonished; and may consider the history of people of preceding ages, and of all that hath befallen them, be restrained. Extolled be the perfection of Him who hath thus ordained the history of former generations to be a lesson to those which follow. Such are the Tales of a Thousand and One Nights, with their romantic stories and their fables.

* or the Orthodox

The actual framework of *The Thousand and One Nights* is merely that: a framework; you all know it; how there was once a king who, shocked at discovering his wife's infidelity, decided to give no subsequent wife time or chance to be unfaithful: he married a fresh one each evening, and put her to death each morning. To call this grotesque and cruel is to say that water wets and fire burns. Finally he married the clever Scheherazade, who spun him a story which lasted until morning, until the hour of execution of the inevitable death-sentence — and then she broke off the story. The king, Shariyar by name, unable to give up the chance of finding how the story came out, decided to wait until the next morning . . . but Scheherazade did not wait; she finished the first story before daybreak — and immediately began on a new one — and, somehow, by the dawn of the next day, she had not finished that one, either. Is there here some faint echo of faithful Penelope, weaving her web of tapestry, telling the impetuous and clamorous suitors that she would indeed choose one of them to succeed the long-lost Odysseus as her husband as soon as the tapestry should be finished? — and then, each night, unravelling what she had woven the preceding day? It may be so. There are certainly elements of *The Odyssey* in the Stories of Sindbad himself. At any event, Scheherazade kept the game up for a thousand and one nights, hence the title of the collection, the anthology, we might call it: at which time King Shariyar gave up, and pardoned her. Where did she *get* all those fascinating stories?

Is it vain to ask? It is vain to ask if there really was a Homer, it is certain that there was no Scheherazade. The language of the stories is Arabic, hence the other title of *Arabian Nights*; I do not know what the present attitude toward them may be in current Arabic literary circles; but in times past the Arabic men of letters looked down upon them all, and despised them as being mere bazaar-fables from Persia and India and who knew where. To ask them their opinion was akin to asking an expert on, say, Wordsworth or Blake his opinion of comic books. The stories, in fact, came from everywhere: not only from the East but from the west as well, they may have assumed roughly their present outlines as early as a thousand years ago, in Baghdad; they were certainly extensively worked over in Egypt; and our present version dates from early in the 18th century. Soon after, they were introduced into Europe via French translations, and, as has often been the case, were passed on to later generations in bowdlerized and abridged versions as stories for children. The same happened to *Gulliver's Travels* and to *Moby Dick*, to *Robinson Crusoe*, to — Children appreciate a good story. They don't enquire about symbolism or archetypes, and they never read critics. The unexpurgated versions would very likely amuse them just as much, but our current attitudes do not permit of our reading to them or letting them read for themselves such little nuggets as "The Night That Abu-Hassan Farted."

The stories of Sindbad the Sailor, however, require very little pruning; and they have already had it, so what follows will not bring a blush to the chastest cheek; onward.

Sindbad, he tells us, was the son of a rich merchant there in Baghdad, in the old land of Babylonia, called by the Greeks Mesopotamia (well, *he* doesn't tell us all this: *I* tell us all this, in case you might think otherwise that Baghdad is in, say, Alabama or Arkansas): Mesopotamia, "Between the Rivers," because this once-so-rich land lay between the Tigris and Euphrates: the rivers join, downstream, and flow into the Persian Gulf which, in turn, enters the Indian Ocean. And he, Sindbad, inherited "wealth and buildings and fields," and, in short, he blew it all on easy living. Well . . . not quite all. When he had come to his senses, he sold what remained and found himself with 3,000 pieces of silver. "And," he says, at that time "it occurred to my mind to travel to the countries of other people . . . and I arose and bought for myself goods and commodities and merchandise, with such other things as were required for travel; and my mind had consented to my performing a sea-voyage."

Now, Sindbad does not tell us here what "goods and commodities and merchandise" he bought for himself, but the matter is not beyond conjecture, there are old sources which list trade items to and from Baghdad, in those days, in what is now called Iraq; and it may be of interest to mention a few several of them: Figured linen, balsam, textile dyes, grain, fruit, carpets, brocades, muslin, silks wrought with gold, damask and velvet, "the best dates in the world," mandrake, indigo, White slaves, beeswax, wool, unicorns' horns, ostrich-feathers, pedigreed she-camels, felt, gems, incense, papyrus, armor, musk, fur, "very sweet sugar cane," paper, truffles, candied capers, zithers, arrow-heads, prunes, combs, honey, fruit syrups, axes, parasols, lead, linen, rose-water, glass, jasmine, pistachios, dancing girls, eunuchs, striped cloth, figs, vinegar sauces . . . The list goes on like a litany; motto: If you don't see it, ask for it.

Sindbad continues (I am using Lane's translation here, unless otherwise stated): "I embarked on a ship, and it descended to the city of El-Basrah, with a company of merchants; and we traversed the sea for many days and nights."

What were they like, the ships on which Sindbad sailed? They were nothing like the European galleons with the carved, cabined poops, as shown in many illustrations; they were almost certainly of the class of vessels called *dhow*s, and perhaps pronounced *zows*, with which the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and other waters of the Asian /African continents have been traversed since semi-ancient times. Let me cite the short entry in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the 1962 edition. (The famous earlier, 11th edition is certainly the best, but mine has suffered from fire and flood and storms and travels and travails: *et n'existe*

plus.)

"*DHOW*, a type of vessel used throughout the Arabian Sea. The language to which the word belongs is unknown. Used of any craft along the East African coast, it is usually applied to the vessel of about 150 to 200 tons burden with a stem rising with a long slope from the water; dhows generally have one mast with a lateen sail, the yard being of enormous length. Much of the coasting trade of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf is carried by these vessels. They were the regular vessels employed [by the Arabs] in the slave trade from the east coast of Africa."

Captain Allen Villiers, the most famous living master of old forms of sail craft (he sailed the replicas of the *Mayflower* and the *Golden Hind* across the ocean) has written a book about the various kinds of dhows as they were still to be found in the 1930s. Although he depicts them as being efficient for such purposes as bringing mangrove poles from East Africa to Saudi Arabia and even up to Bahrein at the upper Persian Gulf, there is little glamorous about them in his narrative . . . unless the word "glamorous" be defined other than usually. They were caulked with shark oil and stank abominably. It is as well to forget such details in order to enjoy the luster and sparkle of the stories of *The Thousand and One Nights*. My friends L. Sprague de Camp and Willy Ley have a reference to them in their own book, *Lands Beyond*; it is also brief, so let me quote. — I may as well tell you that the chapter being quoted is called *The Sea of Sindbad*, and I had really forgotten about having read it, around 25 years ago; however, on realizing that I'd started to cover, so to speak, the same ground . . . or water . . . I decided to go ahead anyway — and, in fact, to quote it when appropriate. So herewith: —

"*The First Voyage [of Sindbad]*, like all the others, begins with the minor overland or river trip from Baghdad to Basra, the seaport at the head of the Persian Gulf. Thence Sindbad embarked . . . So far the trip is commonplace; the hearers know all about these trading voyages down the coast of Fars [Persia, that is, or Iran] and beyond, on which the lateen-rigged dhows of the Arab maritime world were constantly setting forth — as they still do. However, by this literary device the author, like those of the *Odyssey* . . . gets his hero away from the known and the normal to far places where the strange and the monstrous are to be expected. Remember that to the hearer Baghdad was the humdrum world of every day, not the land of the exotic and fantastic. On they went, south and east, under their bellying trapezoidal sails — pretty things and efficient to light breezes, but the Devil's own work to tack with — "

I have said that the united Tigris and Euphrates Rivers flow into the Persian Gulf and that this enters the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean, with its confluent seas, rolls its waves from Africa in the west to Australia

in the east, and laves the shores of continents, subcontinents, archipelagoes and solitary islands and peninsulas alike. The ships and boats of men have crossed and recrossed these waters since the most ancient times. The monsoon winds blew them at established seasons, first in one direction; then, months later, another. Trade routes had been set up, but time and chance had happened to them all, and they did not stay set. What had been certain and familiar in one century had often become lost or confused or fabulous in another. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, composed 800 years or so earlier than the earliest version of the *Arabian Nights*, was a trade manual and navigation guide into which as it were despite itself elements of romance had intruded. One might say of anyway the Stories of the Voyages of Sindbad that, on the contrary, they were romances into which had intruded elements of trade and navigation. It remains to be seen to what extent we may part the gaudy curtains of its fictions and discern the lineaments of its facts.

Where, indeed, did Sindbad sail?

Remember that there was no magnetic compass yet to guide the sailor on the sea; and that, although something of latitude was known, it was to be another 900 years or so before a firm method of fixing longitude was to be available. Sometimes, I have said, the ships went where the winds blew them: that is, you could make your way down into the paths of the monsoon in the Spring and sail with full sails all the way to India or Ceylon; in September, the monsoon would blow you back the other way. However, for the most part, or as far as other parts and other seasons were concerned, you sailed either by dead reckoning or by guess and by God. In effect, "dead reckoning" means sailing from one landmark to another, aided by a record of how many days' sail between them. Man proposes but God disposes, and you did not always wind up where you had set out to go . . . assuming that you knew, exactly, where you had set out to go. There were storms, rocks, reefs, shoals, there were pirates, errors . . . in a time even much, much later, and in another and a much smaller sea, whose routes were incomparably better known, a Turkish fleet set out for the island of Malta, a mere halfway across the Mediterranean . . . and returned much sooner than expected. To the surprised enquiry as to how things were going on in Malta, the Turkish admiral replied, succinctly, *Malta yok*. There isn't any Malta. Or, "Malta isn't there . . ." *

. . . there were calms, times when there was no wind . . .

But Sindbad's narrative mentions none of this. "We had passed island after island," says he, as he tells (likelier, retells) his sea stories to all the high-class guests in his lordly chamber; and, as they are cracking his

* I cannot indeed swear to the accuracy of this antique anecdote, but I can indeed swear to this: It is *not* advisable to tell it to Turks.

pistachio nuts and eating his figs and dates and roast mutton and chicken pilaff and washing their fingers in his rose-water and ogling his pretty dancing girls all the time he is talking, one may imagine that no one is uncouth enough to interrupt him and demand, "Yes, that's all very well, Sindbad Effendi: but just *what* islands were those?" Not bloody likely. No. "We had passed island after island, and from sea to sea, and from land to land; and in every place by which we passed we sold and bought, and exchanged merchandise." Business, after all, is business. But to intrude and ask, "How much did taffeta fetch by the yard in them islands?" — none of your business. A young man, tired of hearing young Ernest Hemingway talk about "the French women," this-and-that, interposed and asked, "How old are the French women, Hem?"

But that was in another country.

Well, actually, Sindbad's first adventure is pretty old hat . . . or should one say, turban. You all know it. The ship tied up to an island and most everybody went ashore to stretch their legs and cook their rice with cumin-seeds and wash their pajamas: lo! it was not a real island after all! It was a great fish, which had lazed there so long, part-submerged, that grass and trees had grown upon it; troubled by the heat of the campfires, down it *wennnnntttt!* and by the time Sindbad had surfaced and climbed into a washtub and began to paddle with his feet, like Gollum: away went the ship, sails spread, and no roll called or muster taken. Too bad, Sindbad!

A western scholar, checking this story with a venerable Arabi sheikh in the last century, found that the story was well-known; the sheikh assured him that it was recounted (though not in the name of Sindbad) in sources whose authenticity was not to be denied. The one point on which the sages differed, the sheikh said, smoothing his beard, was whether or not the sea-creature was a giant turtle . . . or a whale. Where does this leave us? We may somewhat safely say that giant sea-turtles are not found off the coast of Iceland and that whales are unknown in the Rio Grande. Otherwise your guess is as good as mine.

As for another explanation for the island which sank, de Camp suggests that "... evidently, somebody 'correlated' the reports of the big monsters of the sea and the disappearing and re-appearing islands which were such a hazard to coastal navigation, apparently finding it easier to believe in drifting sea-monsters than in small sandy islands shifted about by currents between one high tide and the next." Easier . . . and more interesting.

Meanwhile, back to Sindbad the Sailor, still paddling in his wooden washtub. By and by he came to another island, where he disembarked, and met up with a man who had tethered a beautiful mare to the shore. Both man and mare were astonished to see him; the mare merely whinnied with "a great cry," but the man was more verbose. Said he,

"Know that we are the grooms of the King El-Mihraj . . . every month, when the moonlight commenceth, we bring the swift mares . . . every mare that has not foaled . . . that they may attract the sea-horses."

This part of the story is perhaps a bit better provided with geographical coördinates. For one thing, "the King El-Mihraj" — in other editions of the Arabian Nights his name is written as "El-Mahrajan" — there is little doubt that this is simply a form of the Indian word "Maharajah," or Great King; this would not help us very much, there having been perhaps hundreds of rulers who have used this title; but more of that later. Let us consider first the sea-horse . . . but let us not consider him very much. The medieval Arab writer El-Kazweenee (or El-Qazwini) (he who said that the "sea-tortoise is so enormous that the people of the ship imagine it to be an island") informs us that "sometimes a foal is produced having a water-horse for its sire and a land-mare for its dam." He adds that the water-horse is black, and lives in the Nile. How Sindbad got into the Nile, we are perhaps not meant to know; but it is alas too likely that someone had too literally translated the Greek *hippopotamos*, the *horse of the river*: and the rest follows. Sindbad has clearly been fibbing here. *Sigh*

There is here, however, or so it seems, at least a faint echo of another travellers'-tale; and since it was probably told on the authority of six learned Greeks and seven erudite Arabs, all with long names difficult to read, hard to pronounce, and impossible to spell, I'll skip them, shall I? Good. Briefly, it is to this effect: There is a place where the horse-breeders take their mares, when the west wind blows, in order that they may become pregnant by this wind, and produce swift foals. And if you doubt this, consider the fact that the west wind's very name is mentioned, to wit: Aquilo, the eagle-swift. Are you still skeptical? Then consider the evidence compiled from old sources by Mr. Clark Firestone, as follows: "Male sheep are conceived when the northeast wind blows, and females when the south wind blows, according to the Tartars, who call the wind 'the foal which courses round the earth.' " If sheep, why not horses? Hah-ah, you cannot answer, bowled over as you are by my remorseless logic! Well, having told you not only the name of the randy daddy of these colts, let me cite an authority whom you had better not dismiss, videlicet *Pliny*. "In the vicinity of Olisipo and the River Tagus, the mares, by turning their faces towards the west wind as it blows, become impregnated by its breezes; and the foals thus conceived are remarkable for their fleetness; but they never live beyond three years." To which one might add, "and neither doth the wind that gets 'em."

Why one wind should wish to commit dalliance with sheep and another prefer horses, I cannot say; there is no accounting for tastes, as the old woman said when she kissed her pig. But where, you may ask (and justly so) is *Olisipo*? If you do, you will expose ignorance in more than merely old-time geography, for "the River Tagus" is still in Portugal; and

Olisipo is merely an old name for Lisbon, which — it has been said — was founded by Ulysses. Another old salt in no great hurry to get home, and in his own right the source of many a tall, tall tale. Does this, then, mean that Sindbad, having somehow gotten into the Nile — and perhaps figuring that the Egyptian lady-horses would have no objections to a night of love with a hippo, for pity's sake — somehow followed the advice of Columbus,* to wit, *Sail On! Sail On!* and wound up on the coast of Portugal?

Who knows? Who knows, for that matter, why the mares turned their faces towards the West Wind in order to become pregnant by it. Odd, odd, very very odd. Wonders never cease.

By the way, who was this fellow whom I quote from time to time, al-Qazwini (or, as Lane (author of *Customs of the Modern Egyptians* — “modern” as distinct from “ancient” — the book was written during the 1840s) spells it, El-Kazweenee)? Again I bring in a paragraph from de Camp:

“The Arab storytellers could likewise point to a scientific book by one of their own people, which had . . . great authority among them. Its author, Mahmud al-Qazwini, is now chiefly remembered for his remark that the greatness of Allah can be deduced from the fact that he [sic] lets the rain fall only on fruitful land and not on the desert where nothing would grow anyway, but he was for a long time the chief authority on things zoölogical in the Moslem world. He died in 1283, about nine years after the completion of his [book] *Ajayyib al-Makhlukat*, which may be translated as *Wonders of Animate Creation*.”

However. Back to Sindbad. Who says, “And I saw, in the dominions of the King El-Mihraj, an island . . . called Kasil, in which is heard the beating of tambourines and drums throughout the night, and the islanders . . . informed us that Ed-Dejjal is in it.” Who is Ed-Dejjal? He is, says de Camp, “al-Dajjal **”, the Muslim Antichrist.” A hint? You bet. Our old Ayrab friend, El-Kazweenee, does speak of an island called Kabil, not indeed quite the same as Kasil, but prior to the Age of Dictionaries it was evidently against almost everyone's religion to spell a name the same way twice — we have after all only six signatures of Shakespeare, and he wrote his one name six different ways, I'm told; hoyts *you?* — so let's say that Kasil and Kabil are the same, because, furthermore, what says El-Kaz. of “Kabil”? Listen: “In it are heard by night the sounds of drums and tambourines, and disturbing cries, and disagreeable laughter; and the sailors say that Ed-Dejjal is in it, and that he will come forth from it.” So the next time I hear such sounds I won't just assume that it's a rock concert, I'll know that it is Ed-Dejjal and his

* or, at any rate, of Joaquin Miller.

** Lit., “The Deceiver.”

bunch, whooping it up prior to coming forth to lay waste the Earth. (How's your mom, Ed?)

Quoting one of them matter-of-fact people who won't let nobody have no fun, Lane says that he says of the island Kasil/Kabil, "The roaring of the waves amongst its hollow rocks might, not improbably, have resembled the sound of drums." *Humph*. This fellow quoted is a Mr., would you believe it, Hole. Double *humph*.

Well, but where does all this lead us . . . if anywhere? Patience. We consult the wise men of Arabia (and its circumjacent coasts) in the olden times; they knew a thing or two; they say that Kabil was a possession of the King of Zaniij, that another name for Zaniij was Raneh, and that the King of Raneh was named El Mihraj. Well! And Mr. Lane, the translator of *The Thousand and One Nights*, suggests that *Zaniij* or *Raneh* was *Borneo*: and he proves it by sundry other proofs: but I for one will take his word. Sindbad was in Borneo. No hippos, true, but what the hell, man can't have everything.

Why then did the later editors of the *Arabian Nights*, when they kept adding good stuff to it (the latest funny story heard in the Big Bazaar, or an appropriate poem that their brother-in-law had just written), why didn't they add as it were as an aside, *Sindbad was really in Borneo* . . . ? Maybe because they never put two and two together. Any maybe they were afraid it might spoil the story and make it too realistic. And of course maybe they just didn't care.

Are there really no canals on Mars? Not even one? Only one? Not —

Well, well, before long and after all, there is Sindbad back in Baghdad again. The Big Apple. Can't stay away, it seems. The old home town, don't knock it if you haven't tried it. Mameluke, another cup of *cawwah!* — and put just a teensy bit more ambergris in it this time. Say, you fellows, did I ever tell you about the time —

When I myself was ever so much younger: say, about the latter part of the Administration of Franklin Pierce, there was still being sung a song of which I can remember only the words (which are in fact the title), *How Y' Gonna Keep 'Em down on the farm, after They've Seen Paree?* In Sindbad's case, however, he already *was* in Paree . . . so to speak. I am afraid that there was in the soul of Sindbad a good deal of the spirit of the travelling salesman. And I think, too, that Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* would have met with instant understanding on Sindy's part.

In a way, there really was a Sindbad, sort of; his name was Mohammed Ibn Battuta; and he was a Berber, a native of Northwest Africa; if anything, as far as time and territory are involved, he out-Sindbaded Sindbad. I believe that he spent something like 34 years in travelling, from Morocco to China, and back again. The only trouble is that he, for one thing, lived hundreds of years after the putative time of Sindbad. The other trouble is that he didn't draw the long bow near as much. Perhaps

he had been influenced by Sindbad, perhaps he was a reincarnation. Even if you have never heard of him you have heard of anyway one of his stories, under the name of The Indian Rope Trick: evidently Ibn Battuta was the first to mention it in writing.

I'm tempted to bring in Ibn Battuta right along here because of his Sindbadian parallels, or whatever; and also because his life experiences are so exceedingly interesting. But I think I'll withstand the temptation and perhaps employ him or them another time . . . perhaps in an adventure entitled *The Man Who Was Sindbad the Sailor*. Perhaps . . . and perhaps not.

Now, I shall not, from here, invariably be giving the adventures of Sindbad in the invariable and same order in which they appear in the *Alf Layla Wa-Layla*, *The Thousand and One Nights*. For one thing, it really makes no difference as far as the original account goes; the tales do not in any way hang one upon another. And, for another . . . another reason, that is . . . I want to save what I think is the most interesting discovery for the last. And, partly, this is because (partly) it is my own discovery. Have you purchased your goods and merchandise, then? Is your sea-bag all packed? Your life insurance paid up? Yes? Good. All ashore that's going ashore. And — onward.

"The vessel proceeded with us, confiding in the blessing of God (whose name be exalted!), over the roaring sea agitated with waves, and the voyage was pleasant to us; and we ceased not to proceed in this manner for a period of days and nights, from island to island and from sea to sea, until a contrary wind rose against us one day." In short, the inevitable shipwreck is about to happen; they were almost compulsory in travel narratives, and were indeed fairly common. I have been shipwrecked, or, at any rate, boatwrecked, upon an, as it so happened, desert island myself: it is no joke. However, let us skip about a bit — hah-hah! — the Third Voyage: Sindbad and his friends are attacked in their ship by the inhabitants of the Mountain of Apes, termed in some editions The Island of Apes; the Apes in fact captured the ship and drove the sailing-men ashore; as if that was not bad enough, they met up with a giant: "... tusks like the tusks of swine . . . a mouth of prodigious size . . . and he had ears like two mortars [some texts say, like two barges], hanging down upon his shoulders. . . ."

This giant is — alas — a cannibal, and kills and spits and roasts and eats sundry of Sindbad's comrades in much the same manner as the cyclops Polyphemus eats the comrades of Ulysses in *The Odyssey*: and when we read further that Sindbad had his comrades heat great sticks in the fire and blind their giant and so make their escape — just as did Ulysses, who had only one eye to deal with — then we may suspect that somebody had been reading *The Odyssey* . . . probably not the second giant, though. This in itself, then, gives us no hint as to where Sindbad sailed: but what about

the rest of it? Well, no less an authority than the learned Ibn El-Waradee informs us that "the Island of Apes . . . is large, and in it are marshy forests and numerous apes . . . those who come to them in ships, they torture with biting and scratching and stoning; but the people of the two islands of Khartan and Martan employ strategems against them . . ."

The learned Mr. Lane suggests that "the two islands of Khartan and Martan" are actually one island; and adds, "I think that it is Sumatra." And I think so, too. And when we learn that a Mr. Marsden (not otherwise described,* other than that he is quoted by the equally mysterious Mr. Hole) informs us that "the inhabitants of Neas . . . bore their ears . . . the lower parts being stretched till they touch the shoulders," we are at once reminded that the ears of Sindbad's cannibal giant were also "hanging down upon his shoulders . . ." And where is the island of Neas? Mr. Marsden informs us: ". . . *adjacent to Sumatra.*" That clinches it. Sumatra is one of the immense islands of what used to be the Dutch East Indies and are now the Republic of Indonesia. And Sindbad was *there*.

Where else was he? He is kind enough to inform us that he was in the Island of Al-Sarandeeb, which we already understand to be an old name for Ceylon (which now has a new name, Sri Lanka). And, by means of comparing old names with newer names, and by comparing geographical descriptions with geographical facts, it seems reasonable to conclude that he was also in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, in the Indian Ocean: it also seems that he was in sundry islands of the Straits of Sunda, again, in what is now Indonesia; and that he was several times in Sumatra. Again. And on one of his voyages he seems to have discovered the Elephants' Graveyard, and so far as I know, *no* one discovered it before him. (And no one, really, since!)

We now come to the concluding incident in this Adventure; although, as I indicated earlier, it is not the concluding one in the voyages as they appear in the text of *The Arabian Nights*. I have omitted the story of the Valley of Diamonds, because it did not take place on or near the sea: suffice it to say that the same story appears in The Travels of Messer Marco Polo and those of Sir John De Mandeville; and that as for the practice of cutting up sheep and throwing the pieces into an inaccessible gorge where diamonds stuck to them, in order to raid the nests of birds who had picked up the meat with the precious stones still sticking to it, why, has any shade of confirmation of this otherwise great yarn ever come to my attention? Listen:

Still more wonderful is the mode in which [the Arabians] collect the

* He may have been one of Marco Polo's translators, though. And then again he may not.

cinnamon. Where the wood grows, and what country produces it, they cannot tell — only some, following probability, relate that it comes from the country in which Bacchus was brought up. Great birds, they say, bring the sticks which we Greeks, taking the word from the Phoenicians, call cinnamon, and carry them up into the air to make their nests. These are fastened with a sort of mud to a sheer face of rock, where no foot of man is able to climb. So the Arabians, to get the cinnamon, use the following artifice. They cut all the oxen and asses and beasts of burthen that die in their land into large pieces, which they carry with them in those regions, and place near the nests: then they withdraw to a distance; and the old birds, swooping down, seize the pieces of meat and fly with them up to their nests; which not being able to support the weight, break off and fall to the ground. Hereupon the Arabians return and collect the cinnamon, which is afterwards carried from Arabia into other countries.

Where was *this* from? From our supposedly skeptical old friend, Herodotus, Book III, is where. Got to hand it to them Ay-rabs, a nosey Westerner asks them the source of the expensive cinnamon of Ceylon, so why naturally they spin him a story make your eyes dizzy: it worked? Oh bless your beard it worked! And, over a thousand years later, being asked equally none-of-your-business questions about the source of the diamonds of India, they spun *the same story!* and it *still* worked!

Verily, all foreigners are mad. . . .

In the book this is "The Second Voyage of Es-Sindibad of the Sea."

Know, O my brothers, that I was enjoying a most comfortable life, and the most pure happiness . . . until it occurred to my mind, one day, to travel again to the lands of other people, and I felt a longing for the occupation of traffic [that is, trade], and the pleasure of seeing the countries and islands of the world, and gaining my subsistence. [Clearly, Sindbad was not one of those who were meant to live over the linoleum store!] I resolved upon that affair, and, having taken forth from my money a large sum, I purchased with it goods and merchandise suitable for travel, and packed them up. [Again, he fails to inform us what "goods and merchandise" they were, and again we are obliged to guess: Olive oil? Nutmegs? Saffron? Yellow and striped broadcloth? Pigs of iron and pigs of lead? Pearls bored for necklaces? Golden rings with red cornelians? Or even, perhaps . . . perhaps . . . ivory, apes, and peacocks? Quién sabe? Onward.]

Then I went to the banks of the river, and found a handsome new vessel, with sails of comely canvas; and it had a numerous crew, and was superfluously equipped. So I embarked my bales in it, as did also a party of merchants besides; and we set sail that day. The voyage was pleasant to us, and we ceased not to pass from sea to sea, and from island to island; and at every place where we cast anchor, we met the merchants and the

grandeess, and the sellers and the buyers, and we sold and bought and exchanged goods. [Clearly, Sindbad and his comrades of the voyage had a very sound grasp of the fact that, concerning international trade, if you don't buy, you can't sell.]

Thus we continued to do until destiny conveyed us to a beautiful island, abounding with trees bearing ripe fruits, where flowers distilled their fragrance, with birds warbling, and pure rivers: but there was not an inhabitant, nor a blower of a fire. [This last phrase is rather vivid, isn't it? and brings to my mind a scene of long ago when on the island of Cyprus I first saw anyone pick up a hollow tube and indeed blow through it to quicken the fire of carob wood with its fragrant scent and chestnut wood with its rosy heart. No doubt the scene brought back memories to Sindbad, too, and he sat himself down and ate; and so, by and by, he] became immersed in sleep, enjoying that sweet zephyr and the fragrant gales. I then arose, and found not in the place a human being nor a Jinnee. The vessel had gone with the passengers; and not one of them remembered me, neither any of the merchants nor any of the sailors: so they left me in that island.

One is divided between demanding, *What island?*, and once more sighing, Poor Sindbad! This was always happening to him. One wonders *why* he was so supremely forgettable, and one wonders if perhaps it was *he* who always won those poker games which wile away the lonely hours to which sailors when at sea were so often subject . . . But be that as it may. He did what every sensible traveller does, once he realizes that he has been marooned or cast away: he climbed a tree. Now, at first, although he "saw nought save the sky and water and trees and birds, and islands and sands;" that was not the end of it: "Looking, however, with a scrutinizing eye, there appeared . . . a white object . . . of enormous size . . ." Naturally he shinnied down the tree and trudged over to have a closer look.

I am sure that you all by now remember what he finally found; to wit, "a huge white dome, of great height and large circumference." He had no idea what it was, until he saw coming straight down in his direction, hiding the sun and darkening the sky, an absolutely gigantic bird. And, "I remembered," said he, "a story which travellers and voyagers had told me long before, that there is, in certain of the islands a bird of enormous size, called the rukh, that feedeth its young ones with elephants. I was convinced, therefore, that the dome which I had seen was one of [its] eggs."

Well! Here was a pretty pickle! Not, mind you, that the rukh — or *roc* — itself ate elephants, which would have been quite bad enough: but that its *young* ate them! *Hoo*, boy!

Before he could make the effort to escape, which would, probably, have been most unwise, the rukh landed on its colossal egg and settled down

"and brooded over it with its wings . . . and . . . slept . . ." Did Sindbad worry as to what might happen if the damned thing ever *hatched*? Not a bit of it! He unwound his turban and twisted it like a rope and tied himself to one of the birdy's big feet; in the morning, sure enough, up and away flew Rocky, and, by and by, came down to land, when see with what dispatch Sindbad untied himself! The rukh, or roc, seized up a huge serpent in its claws, and flew away again in an instant. Sindbad, you will recall, now found himself in the valley of the diamonds, and as to his adventures and experiences there: enough.

Question: Was there such a bird? If so, what?

Question: Was there such an island? If so, which?

Forget about the elephant bit; it is now clearly established that no bird can carry more than a few pounds weight; and it is also clearly established that the American condor — the few specimens which are left — with its maximum wing-span of about fourteen feet has absolutely the largest spread of any bird which flies: and it cannot even lift a normal-sized human baby. No bird which has ever lived could, by the laws of physics, lift even a *oaby* elephant. So the whole thing must be simply one more whopper . . . Right? Right.

Only maybe not.

There are so many items which appear both in Sindbad (and other places in the Arabian Nights) and in the Book of the Travels of Ser Marco Polo, that one is often tempted to believe that one of them must have drawn upon another; what, if anything, says Messer Marco, on the subject? Anything at all? You bet. Listen: "The people of the island report that at a certain season of the year, an extraordinary kind of bird, which they call a rukh, makes its appearance . . . being so large and strong as to seize an elephant with its talons," and so forth. And so on. Hm. What are we to make of this? We are to make, first, a note that M.P. does not say he saw it himself, no: "The people of the island report," etc. Okay. *What* island? The well-voyaged Venetian jewelry-merchant says it is called Mogadixco, or something like that. Something is at once clearly wrong here: Mogadisco, in modern spelling, is not an island, it is a city on the mainland of Africa, and the present capital of Somalia. M.P. says that it has elephants, well, it is in Africa and Africa does have elephants, Africa has islands, too; but none of the islands have elephants.

Marco Polo has had a very good reception with scholars in general; if he says something, one is inclined to believe that it is so. But, "Even Homer sometimes nods," so it need be no surprise that Polo also dozed at times. In short, he never went to Mogadixco; and his reports followed reports which were sadly incorrect in several places. One of the mistakes has gotten onto the map, and given its name to an island; and the island's name takes the form of Madagascar, and Madagascar ain't got no elephants. It never did have.

But at the time that Polo was writing, Madagascar did have people, yes, and Sindbad says that his island had *no* people: "nor any blower of a fire." We've seen that *The Arabian Nights*, in one form or another, — in its earlier form, that is, — probably dates back to the 9th century.

And, in the 9th century, it seems, *Madagascar may have had no people.*
Nor any blower of a fire.

And, although it lies about 250 miles off the coast of Africa, the other side of the Mozambique Channel, and though the inhabitants on the Channel side seem to be in large part of African descent, it seems that they were not the original inhabitants. Who, then, were? The present "people of the island" have a tradition that a race of white dwarfs were; and it has been suggested that this referred to white lemurs; and it has been also said that it refers to the African Bushmen, who, though small, are not exactly dwarfs; and, though light, are not white: also, there is absolutely no evidence that they ever lived on Madagascar. The title of "original inhabitants" must therefore go to some other people, and for the moment I decline to drop the other shoe.

My friend the late Willy Ley, of whom I could tell more than one jovial story, has in his book *Exotic Zoology* a chapter called "The Island of the Man-Eating Tree"; let me quote his opening lines. "Madagascar — 228,000 square miles in extent — is one of the world's largest islands, ranking fourth in size after Greenland, New Guinea, and Borneo." Some may wonder at the absence of Australia from the list; but, of course, Australia ranks as a continent. Some scientists have suggested, indeed, that the geology and flora and fauna of Madagascar are so different, so distinctive, that perhaps it, too, should be considered as a continent . . . small though it is. There are no large native mammals. This was true of other islands late on the discovery list; for example, Iceland, New Zealand, and Mauritius — and it is rather curious that perhaps none of these places had any inhabitants at the time of the first collection of *The Arabian Nights*! It is sometimes, though only sometimes, typical of islands which lack either human inhabitants or large mammals, that some of the native birds lose the power of flight — presumably because there are no dangerous creatures from which they need to escape by flying. It sometimes also happens that some of these birds grow to very large size. In Iceland it was the great auk, in New Zealand the moa, and in Mauritius the dodo.

All of these birds are now extinct.

Was it true of Madagascar as well?

Yes, it was.

When the "first inhabitants" arrived, they found its plains and valleys being grazed by what L. Sprague de Camp describes in his *Lands Beyond* as "... an emu-like bird about as tall as an ostrich, but much more massive, weighing up to a thousand pounds. It is, in fact, the heaviest

bird ever known to have lived.” — Now listen carefully — “But its most distinctive attribute was not so much its size as the size of the eggs it laid, which are the biggest eggs any naturalist ever heard of. While they were not fifty paces in circumference, like those of Sindbad’s rukh, they had a capacity of 2½ gallons, or six times that of an ostrich egg and 150 times that of a chicken’s egg.” The scientific name is *Aepyornis ingens*. This bird was certainly alive when Madagascar’s “First Fleet” landed, about the year 900 or 1000, or perhaps earlier. They may have even been alive during the 17th century, when a Frenchman who had lived among the natives wrote, “*There is a very large bird which hides in the woods.*” But they are certainly not alive now: hiding in the woods did not, in the long run, help. However, so thick are the shells of their immense eggs, that a number have survived — the eggs, not the birds — and, in fact, are sometimes still being found. If they are only partly broken, the Malagasy (the name of both the people and their Republic: the island itself remains “Madagascar”) use them for storage purposes; if they are intact, the Malagasy regard them as sacred, and sacrifice sheep to them.

Only two more things, before I go, to establish the connection of the rukh, or roc, with Madagascar. Marco Polo and certain old-time Arabic-language writers mention that huge feathers from the rukh were sometimes seen in other countries; it is now agreed that these were actually the immense fronds from the *Raphia* (or *Rofia*) palm: habitat, so to speak, of the *Raphia* palm? Answer: *Madagascar*.

(It is irrelevant, but, I think, interesting, to recall that it was off the coasts of Madagascar, that “Great Red Island,” that William Kidd, a Master of Craft ((Captain Kidd? the Captain Kidd? That same.)) that Captain Kidd captured those ships for whose capture he was captured! . . . *as he sailed, as he sailed* . . . For which he was sentenced to be hanged in chains of Executioners Wharf, and his body to lie till three high tides had washed over it; the sentence being duly carried out. One of the British judges who condemned him was a Mr. Justice Turtin; some several years ago and in what was then a British colony I met a local planter, a Mr. Turtin; “That’s a well-known name,” I remarked. He nodded without surprise. “Yes,” he said, “I plant more Great Cavendish bananas than any other man in the colony. . . .”)

Why, then, having clearly set forth the claim of Madagascar as the Island of the Roc, why do we speak of Ceylon? And what do you mean by murmuring — or even thinking — *who* speaks of Ceylon? Have you already forgotten that Sindbad himself tells us that he was in Es-Serandeeb? — in other words, Ceylon? (By the way, another form of the name was *Serendip*: Horace Walpole, whom I have described elsewhere as a “kindly, faggoty Englishman,” son of the mid-18th century prime minister, wrote a story about certain princes of Serendip: they set out to solve problems, but they never solved them because, on the way, they

always came across something else, quite by accident, which diverted them: hence the lovely and useful word, *serendipity*. I might note here that almost all of these Adventures in Unhistory were discovered via serendipity. I might note, also, that my *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, which defines serendipity as **the gift of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for**, attributes *The Three Princes of Serendip*, not to Walpole, but to "a Persian fairy story": I discovered this whilst trying — quite uselessly — to discover the meaning of the word *dagoba* . . . if this is not serendipity, then nothing is.)

Ceylon! A Buddhist country . . . among other things. Characteristic of Ceylonese Buddhism are immense sacred buildings often painted white, and called dagobas. I wish I knew what the word really means; however — Yes. Many things might be said about the architecture of the dagoba, but I shall content myself with one: they all look the same, basically, like immense, gigantic, colossal *eggs*! And de Camp, from whom I have borrowed so freely (it makes no matter, we are friends) believes that the sight of one of these dagobas from a distant view of the old Ceylonese city of Anuradhapura may be one origin of the roc's egg. Sindbad was *there* . . . in Ceylon . . . remember?

But as to how the *aepyornix*, which, unlike the eagle could not fly, and, unlike the great auk could not swim, *got* from Madagascar to Ceylon, I



can only answer, in terms of another culture: Go know.

Which leaves one more shoe for me to drop. We have established the locale of several places whither Sindbad sailed; more of them are to be found in one area than in any other one area, and that one is what we now call Indonesia: Borneo, Sumatra, Java, Celebese, and other islands. Indonesia is an ethnic affiliate of Malaysia: in fact, it was from either what is now Malaysia or what is now Indonesia (or both) that the original inhabitants of Madagascar came — sailing Westward ho! o'er the white-waved seas of the immense blue Indian Ocean. Some of this voyaging may have been both back and forth: *forth* to settle, and *back* to urge others to settle and to show them the way thither.

Was it, then, by way of these old, *old*-time Malaysian-Indonesian travellers and voyagers to and from Madagascar that the original Sindbad heard of the island where lived the giant bird which laid the giant eggs of the roc? I don't know . . . but I don't know what else. . . . Do you? 🐉



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Readers who want to know more about Ron Goulart are referred back to our August 1980 issue, in which he is interviewed at some length by Darrell Schweitzer. All we can add is that Ron has been the most consistently prolific funnyman science fiction has seen in decades, at least. His special brand of lunacy has been appearing non-stop for at least twenty-five years now. Recent books include Skyrocket Steele and Cowboy Heaven. His most recent appearance in Amazing was "The Foxworth Legatees" in the September 1981 issue.

Of course he wasn't the Beverly Hills Strangler.

He wasn't even a housebreaker, except that once.

But the power of publicity, as Dom D'agastino knew well, can convince people of just about anything. When I read the newspaper accounts of Dom's forlorn low-budget funeral out of a rundown parlor in lower Santa Monica, I was almost tempted to speak up. The thing is, I've found it wisest to keep from getting too involved in messes like this. Especially when there's black magic and Satan worship involved. What the world believes of Dom, now that he's safely buried in that shabby Glendale cemetery, isn't really too important. If I told the truth, and I'm one of the few people alive who knows it all, I'd only put myself in an uncomfortable position.

Dom first confided in me about his appealing little client over lunch. It was at Mama Media's on the Strip and when I came into the long shadowy Italian restaurant, Dom was already in a booth with his eyes on the small TV screen imbedded in the fake brick booth wall.

"Thackeray didn't write *Bleak House*, you halfwit!" he was muttering at the image on the screen. "Oh, hi."

I sat opposite him, glancing at the frantic fat woman on the small greenish screen. "You doing publicity for *Grab It And Run* now?"

"Dickens, Dickens, you dimbulb! Charlie Dickens." Dom was a long, lean guy of thirty-five. Dark, his hair was starting to thin up front. He sat hunched, involved with the game show. "Jesus, you poor blimp, you just blew the first-class air trip for two to Calgary, the videotape recorder with two dozen blank cassettes, and the authenticated Persian carpet. Thackeray, for crying out loud." He reached over, clicked off the booth set, and then grinned across at me. "No, I'm still only doing publicity for that lovable moppet, Billy Firedrake. But I like to keep up."

"Saw Billy beaming from the covers of *Time*, *Us*, *Mammon*, *TV Guide*,

National Intruder, Seventeen, Forb—”

“Yeah, I know.” Dom folded his knobby hands on the checkered tablecloth. “Now they come to us, begging to be allowed to shoot the little bugga. Year ago, when *Cute as a Bug’s Ear* came on to replace *I Married a Fat Girl* on the tube, I practically had to promise forbidden sexual favors even to get a snapshot of the little dear into local sheets. It’s . . . well, that’s what I want to talk to you about.”

“Your success with this kid actor? How old is he now . . . twelve?”

“Twelve, yeah. Chronologically anyway.” His head hunkered further into his shoulders. “Even though you’re an advertising man, you’re honest. In fact, you’re about the only person in the whole of this incredibly sleazy town I trust.”

“Just because I’m an account exec — ”

“I can’t even tell Milky this,” Dom said. “Oh, I trust her. You can’t live for nearly three months with anyone you don’t trust. Milky, however, hasn’t the intellectual capacity for understanding this present situation.”

“By the way, I showed our talent department people that reel of Milky’s gossip broadcasts and they don’t think she’s quite ready for our sponsoring yet. They — ”

“She’s wretched,” he said. “She is the worst TV gossip columnist on Earth. Even her name is ridiculous. Milky Bienstock. Why not change both your first and last names, I have oft asked her. Because her dear old mother watches her on KHAK-TV, that idiotic local channel where being able to afford reruns of *Have Gun, Will Travel* is considered a major media event.”

“Milky’s news items don’t usually turn out to be accurate,” I mentioned. “That business about Burt Reynolds shaving off his moustache, for instance, was — ”

“She’s always wrong.” He hunched even more. “In the five months she’s been doing movie and television news on KHAK she has not got one fact straight. She had Ronald Colman considering a part in *Airport ’84*. She thinks *Gone With The Wind* is a Disney cartoon. She believes the Academy Award statuette is nicknamed after Oscar Mayer. She — ”

“I thought you loved her. You two are residing together in that condo in Santa — ”

“Sure, I love her, but that doesn’t make her smart,” he replied. “You know what I love most about Milky? Her tits. Right. That girl has the most appealing tits I have ever witnessed in my three-and-a-half decades on this miserable planet. Why do you think those louts on KHAK-TV let her anywhere near their tacky studios? Tits. Her tits can do what Mandrake the Magician’s hands do. They gesture hypnotically. They have the power to cloud men’s minds. If Hitler had had a set of tits like Milky’s, he’d have conquered the world and we’d be sitting in Frau Media’s now instead . . . what did I order?”



"I don't think you have yet."

Dom's head bobbed up and down. "Exactly, because I'm . . . I hesitate to use a word like distraught. Except I am. Distraught. Hanging on the horns of a dilemma."

"Lots of guys admire their lady friends' bosoms more than their brains. It's old-fashioned and chauvinistic, yet —"

"No, my problem centers not around Milky Bienstock but around that lovable little moppet Sabine Productions pays me to publicize." Dom lowered his voice some. "I've been doing publicity out here for over ten years. Ten years of that is equal to a couple life sentences on Devil's Island and a hitch in the Foreign Legion for a chaser. I've caused this vast nation of yahoos to fall for an assortment of dumb, rotten, idiotic and depraved clients. Convinced 'em that louts were geniuses, that clunks who had faces like those of rural gas station attendants were fantastic love objects, that bimbos with brains the size of a spent BB were witty." He sighed, sank back against the green-painted wood of the booth. "Still I have never . . . oops, got to catch something." He checked his watch, then turned our booth television set back on.

" . . . police believe the unfortunate housekeeper is the tenth victim of the mysterious Beverly Hills Strangler," the handsome sunbrown newscaster was saying straight at us. "As usual the attack took place when no one else was at home in the palatial mansion. A considerable amount of jewelry and silver was taken, estimated to be worth more than \$100,000. We have some spot footage of the victim being taken away in the morgue wagon. That in ninety seconds. But now this . . ."

A beaming blond boy of twelve appeared on the screen. He was incredibly appealing, glowing with charm and humor. "I think you'll find Mr. Einstein had something else in mind with his famous theory, Pop," he said.

"Ugh." Dom turned the sound off and watched the rest of the sixty second promo spot for *Cute as a Bug's Ear* that way. After switching the set off entirely, he said, "It's hard to believe."

"That the show is number three in the ratings?"

"No, that charming little putz can . . ." He shook his head, leaning toward me. "About a month ago . . . I don't know exactly why . . . I began to get strange feelings, suspicions. About little Billy Firedrake. In real life he's not quite as sweet as he is on the screen, but who is? Except I started . . . sensing something else. So, unbeknown to Billy or any of the band of toadies he keeps around him, I began to poke and dig. Snuck back onto the grounds of his Beverly Hills estate after I'd allegedly gone home. I . . . ah, hello, Orlando. You're looking especially fit."

The gaunt waiter blinked. "You think so? I just had one lung removed. This is my first day out of the —"

"Naw, nobody'd guess if you didn't tell them. You've got the glow of

health." Dom opened his menu.

"To you it's a glow, Mr. D'agastino. To my wife a pallor. Her Uncle Giacomo had exactly such a pallor right before he dropped — "

"I, too, had an Uncle Giacomo who lived to be exactly one hundred and one and on his best day he never looked half as healthy as you do right now. I'll have the number six lunch, Orlando."

Smiling, the waiter took my order next and then left us.

"Poor bastard," reflected Dom, watching him totter away. "I'll be surprised if he lives long enough to bring us our dessert."

I asked, "You've discovered something unsettling about Billy Firedrake?"

"He's an orphan."

"So I read in some of your releases."

"His father was killed when he supposedly drove his sports car into a big tree over in Woodland Hills two years ago, right after the moppet signed up for his first major TV commercial." Dom gazed, slightly nervously, to his right. "I've looked up an eyewitness, a gardener. He swears the car blew up before it hit anything. Before."

"Wouldn't the police have found traces of — "

"This wasn't done with explosives," he assured me. "Take little Billy's mother. Electrocuted in her bath when a radio fell into the tub. There was a maid . . . by this time Billy and his mom were pulling down \$200,000 from Billy's commercial work and could afford a couple of servants and a place in the Palisades. . . . Anyway, this maid is now locked away in a private loony bin up the coast. Yet she maintains she saw that radio hopping along the hall, on its own power, and then jumping into the tub with mama."

"That's a pretty good reason for locking her away, if she was seeing things like that."

"Suppose, though, she really did see it? Suppose someone, someone who didn't want to share any more of his burgeoning income with anyone, made that radio behave the way it did? Further suppose the same little chap caused the gas in Pop's tank to explode?"

"What are you talking about? How could that sweetfaced little kid — "

"Black magic."

"Have you thought about taking some time off, vacationing in Calgary or — "

"I'm sane, completely." He tapped his temple, then his chest. "Sane and sound. I have proof . . . well, not exactly proof. But I've seen things out at the mansion."

"Such as?"

"Billy is . . . he's possessed of a demon. He houses some kind of Satanic force within him. It gives him incredible magical powers, prompts him to practice the vilest kinds of Satanic rites in — "

"C'mon. That lovable little kid?"

"You're talking about the surface Billy," Dom insisted. "Look, I created the image. I'm the one who helped convince you yahoos he was sweet and guileless."

"Yahoos don't draw a six figure salary from — "

"Okay, so you're not a yahoo. But let's keep your personal identity problems out of this," he said. "What I'm trying to get across is this: the kid is a monster. All the success he's garnered was gotten through the use of black magic, devil worship, vile sacrifice, repellent ritual and . . . worse."

"You ought to quit working for him, ask Sabine Productions to switch you to a new — "

"I can't do that. If I make a frumus, Sabine'll have me carted off to one of those goofy factories like the housemaid," he said, his hands sliding off the tabletop and dropping into his lap. "If I escape that, I'll probably be blacklisted and turned into a pariah. That'd mean losing Milky, too. See, she happens to be very money-oriented." He shook his head resignedly. "I've become habituated to those fantastic tits of hers. I can't give 'em up, withdrawal symptoms would kill me dead."

"What'll you do then?"

"I don't know, but I'll work something out," Dom assured me. "Oy! Right now we've got to get our expiring waiter to hustle his butt. I'm due to take Milky to a cocktail party at the Moppet's. It's to promote his new novel."

"He's written a novel?"

"That kid can do most anything," answered Dom.

Less than a week later I was called out of town on an agency trouble-shooting assignment that ended up keeping me away for nearly a month. Thus most of my knowledge of how Milky Bienstock rocketed to fame I came by secondhand and after the fact. I spent the time in and around Detroit, where one of our advertising clients had been test marketing a new moist cat food called Kittytonic with F-16. F-16 was actually an incredibly potent synthetic catnip they sprayed on every sack of the stuff. Store managers had begun complaining that bands of crazed cats were breaking into their supermarkets by night to get at Kittytonic. My job was to help the client's PR people come up with some radio commercials to soothe all the people who'd grown upset over the thousands of packs of marauding cats who were roaming Detroit and its several suburbs by night. We also got involved, after being pressured into it by several local officials, in setting up detoxification centers for the numerous hopelessly addicted pets Kittytonic had created. An added problem involved convincing the client, who phoned me hourly from the head office in St. Louis, that he had to go easy with F-16 from hence forward. He'd never

had a cat food that caused such excitement before.

Thus I wasn't in Los Angeles when Milky Bienstock left KHAK-TV for a position as Hollywood gossip commentator on RWBS's highly successful morning network news and talk show, *Off Your Ox, America!* The regular gossip had been fatally injured when her radio fell into her bathtub. Milky auditioned, winning out over all the competition. "It wasn't merely her incredible tits that swayed 'em," Dom explained to me later. "There was hoodoo involved; that little putz cast a spell to guarantee Milky the berth."

I wasn't completely convinced of that, although it did seem odd that Milky, who'd never been able to get even the most obvious agent's planted item straight, should catapult into one of the most prestigious gossip spots on national TV. She actually beat out six other better qualified lady reporters and even old Johnny Whistler, at ninety-six years of age the acknowledged dean of Hollywood news-spreaders. Whistler, though Dom didn't suspect it then, would figure in his life a bit further along. Dom was always kind to Johnny Whistler, having admired him from his youth, and he always saw to it that the ancient columnist got a few exclusive PR items for the daily five-minute newscast he did for a radio station in Oxnard. "You have to respect the Hollywood traditions, even though few people do in this heartless town."

When Milky had been on the network's morning show for less than a week, they decided to add her to the staff of reporters and commentators on the fast-rising midnight show, *Nitecap*. It was on her first three-minute nighttime segment that Milky made the incredible statement that the reclusive screen immortal Gilda Gabbo was going to come out of her forty-year retirement to play a cameo in a film tentatively titled *Seven Brides for Seven Truckers*. I figured Milky was falling back to her old style, but the next morning no less an authority than the *New York Times* confirmed the news, running an exclusive interview with the famed actress. "I don't know why I'm doing this exactly," Gabbo admitted. "There's something almost . . . mystical about it."

Every other prediction Milky made, no matter how far-fetched, came true. Even a new one about Burt Reynolds' moustache. She seemed to know what the great and near-great of Hollywood were going to do almost before they did. She was privy to their most furtive liaisons, their innermost secrets. The ratings on both her shows climbed most impressively.

I did get one or two phone calls from Dom D'agastino while I was stuck in Detroit. I had several cases of the suspect cat food stacked in the living room of my hotel suite and several dozen cats had broken into the hotel to howl outside my door. One result was I had a tough time catching everything Dom said on his last call.

" . . . she's done what?" I asked, pressing the receiver tighter against my ear.

"Moved in with that demonic moppet," hollered Dom out in Los Angeles.

Quite a few of the aroused cats were clawing at the door as well as yowling.

I asked, "Milky this is?"

"How many women with unique tits am I currently involved with, yahoo? Milky, yes. She's moved into Billy's mansion."

"He's only twelve."

"This isn't a sex thing, or at least not exactly," Dom explained at the top of his voice. "She hadn't, you know, even met him until that fateful party. The awful one I hauled her to the same day I lunched with you last. Milky fell under Billy's goddamn spell and — hold on a sec." His phone clacked down on his glass-top coffee table. I heard, when my own local caterwauling allowed, squabbling voices in the background from his end. "Oy, excuse it."

"Is something going on wrong there?"

"Naw, I just wanted to catch *Next Of Kin Bowling*. Never miss it," Dom said. "This whole thing with Milky, her sudden climb to fame, her shacking up with that little putz . . . it's all black magic and Satanism. He, sensing a potential slave, promised her untold success in return for a concession or two. I'm near certain Milky went and signed a pact with him and the powers of darkness he personifies. Her success is the product of witchcraft and evil."

"Could be he's not using sorcery or anything like that, Dom," I tried to point out. "He does have considerable clout now and could've pushed her into the gossip job that way. His show just jumped into the number one spot. NBC has given him a six picture contract. His autobiography is being bid on by seven top paperback —"

"He's possessed, he does the devil's work," persisted Dom. "He's used his powers to lure Milky away from me, depriving me of those incredible tits and . . . well, my life isn't going so good anymore."

"You can always quit Sabine, forget about Milky and —"

"No, nope. I intend to win with Milky. The forces of darkness aren't going to screw me."

"How are you going to —"

"I'll simply . . . what the hell are you listening to?"

"Cats."

"Don't know the show. Local in Detroit?"

"Real cats. Howling," I explained. "Dom, I really think you ought to —"

"Worry not. I'm more than a match for that little moppet."

The day before I returned to Southern California, Dom, unannounced and uninvited, drove up to Billy Firedrake's mansion in Beverly Hills.

The day was grey and fuzzy, mist slurring across everything.

Dom's car had a portable TV built into the back seat. As he drove up the winding tree-lined streets, hunched and clutching the wheel, he listened to the audio part of one of his favorite soaps, *Dreams of Avarice*.

"... interrupt to bring you a news bulletin," came a deep, handsome voice out of the twin speakers in the back seat.

"The notorious Beverly Hills Strangler has claimed yet another victim. Late last night he struck at another posh home, strangling both the butler and a lovely houseguest, Miss Lizbeth Burnley of — "

"Liz Burnley?" Dom exclaimed. "She used to work for Billy, as assistant fanmail secretary. Sure, a blonde girl about twenty-six. Sort of pretty with average tits. Imagine somebody I actually know getting knocked off by that madman."

Turning the set off, he drove the remaining mile-and-a-half in thoughtful silence.

There was a new guard at the iron gates in the high, stucco wall which surrounded Billy's three-acre estate. The man insisted on checking with the main house before admitting Dom. After phoning, he nodded at Dom with obvious distaste written on his thick face and flipped the gate switch.

The mist was even thicker on the estate grounds, blurring the dozens of trees and tangles of hedge and shrubbery, crawling across the sloping lawns.

Billy, wearing stained tennis shorts and a rugby shirt, was perched at the top red brick step in front of the main entrance to this vast Moorish house. He was eating a fat peanut butter and jelly sandwich, licking the dribbles off his thumb and forefinger. "Morning, Dominic," he said, smiling one of his famous smiles. "Little surprised, sort of, to see you here. I suppose they haven't told — "

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Milky."

"Upstairs probably." He tongued a glob of grape jelly off his thumb knuckle. "She doesn't want to see you at all."

"Nor I her, just yet." He climbed up to within one step of the boy multimillionaire. "I came to tell you that you are going to turn her loose."

Billy opened the sandwich like someone peeking into a deck of cards. "That dumb cook, trying to sneak sprouts over on me. Have to reprimand her."

"Or have her strangled?"

The blond boy stood up, he was small for his age, and scowled. "I don't like that kind of talk, Dominic."

"Or maybe you can have her radio, if that gag isn't wearing a bit thin, fall into her bath. Exploding gas tanks work well, too."

"You shouldn't joke about stuff like that."

Dom moved to the same step with Billy. "I want Milky back. I want you to tear up whatever pact you had her sign."

The boy snickered. "Milky is just my houseguest," he said, taking another large chomp of the sandwich. "I'm helping her get ahead in show business, more than you could ever do for her."

"I know all about how you do it, Billy boy," said Dom. "Witchcraft, Satan worship, all sorts of pagan rituals."

Billy flipped the unfinished sandwich into a flowering shrub. "You're upset because your live-in love moved out. So you go and make up dumb stories about me to rationalize your defeat," he said. "The stupid way you've been acting lately is one of the reasons you're no longer with Sabine. I sort of hated —"

"Whoa! What kind of crap are you —"

"Don't yell, it's a dumb way to deal with things," Billy said calmly. "You no longer work for Sabine Productions, you don't do publicity for me. You're out. I have a new person."

"C'mon, even if I'm dumped off your account, Sabine won't toss me —"

"Sure, because I own Sabine now. We bought out Leo and Joel and closed the deal last week. Hasn't been announced in the trades yet, but you should've gotten a memo. You're through, Dominic."

Dom's hands clenched into fists, rose up to chest level before he got himself under control. "Okay, you've had me fired," he said, breathing through his open mouth. "I'm still going to beat you, though, and get Milky back."

"Doubtful." Billy stretched down to rub at a scuffed knee.

"Take a couple days, think it over," said Dom. "If Milky's not back by then, I'm going to break the story. I'll go right to the media with what I know about you, what I've seen going on here in your little domain when you didn't know I was around."

"You do something that dumb and everybody in the industry will begin wondering about your sanity."

"Two days." He turned, started down the red brick steps. Three from the bottom he tripped on nothing, went toppling down. One knee smacked hard on the last step, the other went grating over the white gravel of the path. He pushed himself to his feet and started walking away.

"Be careful," called Billy.

Most of the rest of what I know about what happened to Dom is based on some creative guesswork. The details of the phone conversation with Johnny Whistler, though, I did get straight from Dom.

The veteran gossip called Dom shortly after midnight one evening about a week after Dom had been officially fired from Sabine Productions.

"You've been a pal to me," croaked Whistler. "So I'm going to give you something you can maybe use on those bastards."

"Hold it, Johnny. Let me turn the set down some." It was nearly time for Milky's segment on *Nitecap*. Leaving the phone behind, he hurried across to the television set built into the wall of his spacious, dark-paneled den. "Go ahead, old buddy."

"I'm on to something," confided the old columnist. "It concerns that punk ex-client of yours, Billy Firedrake. I think you can use this as a wedge to get even."

"Oh, so?"

Milky, a silken blouse enhancing her astounding breasts, had appeared on the screen and Dom was straining to listen to her as well as Whistler.

"Here's my first exclusive," the lovely young woman was saying.

"I'll give you a week to play with this any way you want, Dom," said Whistler in his quavering voice. "Then I'll break it on my radio broadcast. I know what Billy's been up to, him and his hangeron."

Dom made a gasping sound. "About the ritu — "

"Somebody I trust got a look at the books."

"What books? Arcane occult tomes that — "

"Ledgers and account books with the *real* profit and loss figures in," Whistler continued. "Little Billy's been skimming tons of dough off his various movie and TV ventures, Dom. Pocketing money that should be going to his partners and investors."

Dom sat up, grinning. "Where did you say he keeps these ledgers?"

"You mean to say you never heard of them? I thought maybe you had."

"I'm an innocent when it comes to financial fooling around, Johnny."

"It's not like it was in the old Hollywood," sighed Whistler. "We were all shrewd in those days. There's a huge redwood desk in the kid's private office at that fortress-like mansion of his in Beverly Hills. Underneath the bottom of the lowest righthand drawer is a concealed compartment. He keeps the books there."

With material like that Dom wouldn't have to prove any of the Satanism charges. Some people might not believe in black magic and its power in today's world, but everybody understood crookedness. Sure, he'd get hold of those ledgers and have enough to ruin Billy Firedrake and get Milky back again. "Listen, I really appreciate your . . . hold on, Johnny."

On the screen across the room Milky was actually talking about the old man. ". . . we're all saddened to hear that Johnny Whistler, beloved and respected Hollywood news reporter for more than a half century," she said, wiping at the corner of an eye and making her bosom jiggle wildly, "has suffered, only scant moments ago, a fatal heart attack. All of us who carry on in the grand tradition he did so much to — "

"Johnny? How do you feel?"

"Fine. Why do you . . . ark . . . oof . . . aaah. . ."

There was the sound of the telephone falling to the floor. Then a final agonized gasp and an awful thumping thud.

"Johnny! Hey, Johnny?"

"We'll all miss him," said Milky.

* * *

Two midnights later Dom was climbing over the wall of Billy Fire-drake's estate. He carried a satchel of burglary tools he'd swiped out of a Hollywood prop warehouse that afternoon. This whole operation was going to look like a simple burglary; he would even swipe a few things besides the secret ledgers. The break-in would appear to be a routine one and thus Billy wouldn't get really suspicious until it was much too late.

The night was warm, muggy. Each breath he took made his lungs feel furry. Landing on a shadowy patch of lawn, he went padding toward the side of the house. There was only one light on, toward the rear of the big place where the cook-housekeeper had her room. Besides a man on the front gate, there was no one else home tonight. Billy and his entire entourage were attending a screening and cocktail party in Westwood; Milky was at the RWBS studios in Burbank doing her gossip segment live. Dom had picked a perfect night.

Everything went quite smoothly. He jimmied a side window, made his way along a dark hall, and let himself into the big beam-ceilinged room where Billy played at being an executive. Shutting the door, Dom clicked on his flashlight. A faint wind, warm and sticky, was drifting in through the half-open French door.

"Could've come that way and saved some trouble," he said to himself. "But, no, breaking in looks much better."

The fake drawer was exactly where the late Johnny Whistler had said it would be. A little simple work with a chisel and he had it open.

"Damn, these are ledgers. Two of 'em." Dom gave out a satisfied chuckling sound. "Milky's as good as mine again."

He tucked the two books, after a quick look inside to make sure they were what he wanted, under the black pullover sweater he was wearing for the occasion. Then he happened to glance at the big color TV set squatting across the room from the desk. The time was a few minutes beyond midnight, just about when Milky's segment was due on *Nitecap*.

"What the hell, let's watch." He crossed and turned on the set, keeping the sound low. Readjusting the concealed ledgers, he squatted down in front of the huge screen.

". . . here's Miss Milky with the latest movietown news."

God, she looked absolutely terrific. Her breasts were two separate entities with lives of their own, each struggling to break free of her dipping V-cut sweater and communicate directly with Dom.

"We must begin on a sad note tonight, friends," she said, a tear

forming at the corner of one lovely eye. "One of this community's most respected publicity men was just gunned down by the Beverly Hills police. Although refusing as yet to confirm this, it seems fairly certain the police have at last caught the Beverly Hills Strangler. In attempting to flee the police, thirty-six-year-old Dominic D'agastino was fatally — "

"I'm only thirty-five!" he told the screen, popping to his feet. "You ought to know that. And besides, I'm no more the — "

"Stay right where you are!"

"That phone tip was right!"

Two uniformed cops had come bursting into the room, guns drawn.

Dom said, "Listen, I can prove that Billy Firedrake is — "

"He's going for a gun!"

Both of them fired at him, several times each.

Dom fell, never getting a chance to tug out the ledgers and show them.



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THE LORD OF THE SKIES

by Frederik Pohl

art: Thomas Kidd



Thomas Kidd
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Slaves dream of freedom, commoners dream of becoming kings, but what do kings dream of? Young Michael Pellica-Perkins — healthy, good-looking, puissant — would have been the envy of your average medieval monarch but the despair of, say, Sigmund Freud, for the paucity of his dreaming. Michael's writ ran for a thousand kilometers in every direction from the bed he slumbered in. Within that space he was not merely a king; he was God. All his dreams came true; so, sleeping, he hardly bothered to dream at all. He didn't have to. And yet, when he woke up, he was not happy. The sun was radiant over his bed and lamb's-wool clouds sailed through a cobalt sky while sweet-smelling warm breezes fanned him. "Oh, Hell," he grumbled, squirming rebelliously in the soft, springy netting to shield his eyes with a forearm, "can't you ever get anything right? That's way too bright!" At once, the sun obeyed his will. It sank back along the rounded ceiling of his bedchamber, below his head, so that the sky became gentle dawn and a distant meadowlark sang awakening. "Well," he said, stifling a yawn, "that's a little better, anyway. What time is it?" His mouth was Saharan and something was tugging at his mind. He was not sure what it was, but it was unpleasant.

The meanest of Michael's subjects was his bedside table. It leaned forward to him. "It is oh seven hundred hours, Mr. Michael," it said placatingly, offering him both orange juice and coffee.

He waved them away indignantly, and flounced around to his bed to press his nose against the pillow. "Oxygen first," he commanded. Obediently, the bed extended its breathing tube. Michael sucked in three or four deep breaths, raised his head experimentally, took another, and then pushed the tube away. Oxygen is almost the best of hangover cures, second only to time; but this morning it did not make him feel good. It did, however, make it possible for him to identify one of the reasons he felt bad. "That's it," he cried, pounding the empty netting beside him. "Why isn't there anyone in bed with me this morning?"

The bed cleared its throat — not precisely that, of course, since it had none to clear; but it made a diffident sound before answering. "The lady Ann isn't here, Mr. Michael," it said apologetically. "If you remember, she divorced you yesterday."

"Divorced me? Now why would she do a thing like that?"

"Well," the bed said, "she wanted the two of you to move to her own habitat, and you didn't want to, and she said —"

"I don't care what she said! Jesus," Michael snarled, "what a way to wake up in the morning. I ought to scrap the whole lot of you." His servants were silent as he took one more hit of the oxygen and then snapped his fingers for coffee. He sucked at the nozzle and all his world was still, waiting to hear if he would explode with indignation and throw the bulb at the ceiling display. But the coffee, at least, was all right.

The thing was, Michael thought, his whole habitat was all right! What

was wrong with it? Did Ann have full sun and moon display in the bedroom, like him? Did she have a ten-thousand-liter water tank to swim in? Or a fern garden, or a banquet hall, or real live pet parrakeets to keep her company? She did not! She lived in a tiny, stripped-down habitat way out past the geostationary orbit, for God's sake, and yet — and yet, the funny thing was that he hadn't really been tired of her yet.

He pitched the empty coffee bulb away — a flower-stand stretched to reach up and catch it for him — and accepted the orange juice sulkily. How stupid of her to leave him! Michael was twenty-six years old, tall, bronzed from his sun display, slim and muscular because of his full health-club systems — another facility Ann did not have in her leaky old tincan! He was, in fact, a catch. The record proved it. Michael had had — he counted back — thirty-one marriages in the last eight years, defining a "marriage" according to the mores of his peers: that is, any arrangement in which one party moved some or all of his or her personal effects into the habitat of the other, just fooling around not counted. None of the other wives had complained about his habitat! They had sooner or later got tired of each other, sure. You had to expect that. But no other wife had said — had said — "What was it again she said?" he asked the bed.

"She said, quote, 'You've got some real nice appliances here, Michael; but this is not a lifestyle I can respect and, besides, the whole Goddam place is falling apart. I want to go back where everything works.' That's what she said," the bed told him. It loved to gossip. It had eidetic memory, too. On the rare occasions when he slept alone, Michael often asked the bed to amuse him. The best way it amused him was by repeating for him the words, sighs, and sounds it had recorded from previous encounters. It was almost like having a deb there with you. At least aurally —

"Oh, wow!" Michael cried. "What an idea I just got! Listen, when you play love scenes back to me, do you think you could sort of twitch the netting so it would be like there was someone there?"

"Of course I could, Mr. Michael," the bed said promptly. "That's a very simple program. Under normal circumstances it would be no problem."

Michael sat up warily. "Are you saying there's something wrong?"

"Well, Mr. Michael —" The bed made that throat-clearing sound again. "— as the lady Ann said last night —"

"She lied! My place is not falling apart!"

"Of course not, Mr. Michael. But it's true that some of the systems need maintenance."

"Then maintain the sons of bitches!"

"The repairs are right at the top of the priority list," the bed promised, "as soon as we procure the necessary materials."

Michael groaned bitterly and thought of going back to sleep: how little joy there was, after all, in being a king when your kingdom was wearing out. He reached for his second bulb of coffee and the table dared to ask, "Are you ready for your bath yet, Mr. Michael?"

"In a minute. First I want my messages."

"Yes, Mr. Michael." It wasn't the table which answered, it was the guardian of his bedroom door. "There are twenty-six in all, of which the majority are sales efforts —"

"They can wait."

"Certainly. Of the two remaining, one is from the lady Ann to say that she will be over sometime today to collect the rest of her belongings."

"Any other calls from debts?"

"No, Mr. Michael," the door said sympathetically, "but they probably all think you're still married to the lady Ann."

Michael sighed. What a bore! He contemplated the fact that now he would probably have to talk to a dozen or more debts before he could find a new wife. And then, who knew how long she would last? Courtship was so tedious. . . . "Any other messages from real live people?"

"From your brother. He wishes to speak to you urgently."

"Sure he does," Michael said gloomily. "I'll take my bath now." Michael generally enjoyed his bath, liked slipping the breathing tubes into his nostril and sliding into the bath capsule while the warm, cleansing water swirled around him; but today the pleasure was spoiled. It wasn't just his debtless state. Having to think about his brother was worse. When you have achieved a practically perfect lifestyle, the last thing you want is to hear somebody tell you how destructive and immoral you are; and of all the somebodies there were, none were better at that than that doom-saying, despair-spreading, tedious old Cassandra: his brother, Rodney.

In the bad old days people in New York City and Minneapolis wiped their running noses, gazed out at the dreary skies, and decided they could not face another winter. So they sold their houses. What they wanted was a better way to live. What they wound up with was California. They dug homes into hillsides, built red-tiled ranch houses over orange groves, and set split-levels on the Pacific sands. Each one was isolated from its neighbors by hedge or wall or cliff. And, for the rest of their lives, they proudly displayed to visiting relatives from back East the California Way of Life. Its characteristics were privacy, diversity, and the annihilation of space. Born-again Baptists lived next to hippie communes, and neither thought anything of driving twenty miles to a dentist, or fifty to see a friend. It was the ultimate in terrestrial lifestyles; but their children's children found a transcending one.

They found it in space.

The home of Michael Pellica-Perkins epitomized the Orbital Way. It was sixty years old. It had served four generations of his family, ever since old Milt Pellica migrated off old Earth into the freedom of space.

It did not look like a home. In fact, if you studied it from outside it resembled, more than anything else, a grossly enlarged World-War-II, American hand-grenade. Egg-shaped. Creased into patterns. Textured like wet sand. It would have been tempting for Grand-dad Pellica to construct his habitat out of steel, so easily obtainable from the asteroid belt, and glass, bounced up from the surface of the Moon; but it would have been suicide. The problem was weather. Not meteorological weather. Solar weather and cosmic weather. During the time of a solar flare, and in fact in lesser degree almost all the time, high-energy particles sleeted in upon the habitat from distant exploding stars and from the Sun. Because they were of such high energy, they did not do a great deal of damage to a human being who got in their way. They ripped right through flesh and bone, like a high-velocity rifle bullet of small calibre. The tissues healed easily enough around such wounds. When the particles, however, hit denser nuclei — anything from iron on up — it was a different story. They knocked pieces out of the nuclei. The pieces themselves were charged particles, slower ones, and many, many more of them; and these particles damaged organic matter very badly. To be inside a steel-walled habitat during a severe radiation storm was to be dead.

So Michael's home was made of concrete. Rock lifted from the Moon by mass-impellers, slathered onto an egg-shaped frame, banded with steel for tensile strength so that it could be moved in orbit without crumbling.

It would have been possible to build windows into it if old man Pellica had wanted them, because glass is almost as sturdy as concrete in shutting out damaging radiation. But they would have had to be a meter thick. So Michael's eyes on outer space were all electronic. The "front door" to his home was a right-angled tunnel bent through the thick end of the egg. (Ionizing radiation does not turn corners.) The outer shell was fuzzed with a messy-looking collection of accessory devices — a cage for the day's catch; a sort of coat rack or garden shed where he kept the equipment that was used only out in space itself; even a sort of "front porch" where he could, if he chose, lie in a spacesuit and stare out at the stars when storms were not expected for a while. Michael did not use that very often. The front porch was a crazy idea of his silly old ancestor's, from the days when merely being in space was still considered wonderfully exciting. Michael himself felt no such emotions. He took no more pleasure in looking at the vista of space than an old Boston whaler found in the sight of the sea. All the flat surfaces of his habitat possessed thin-screen video plates. He could use them to see what was outside when he was curious, or

he could program them to show any vista he liked. The scenery of space was rarely one of his choices; and when he came, pink, damp, and refreshed, out of his bath to discover that his master program director was displaying the rings of Saturn as seen from one of its moons in his living room, he raged, "Now, that's disgusting! Show me something pretty — a redwood forest, maybe, or a nude beach with a volleyball game!"

All of Michael's servants and permanent companions were of course robots. Not homoforms; hardly anybody kept human-shaped machines in his habitat, and those who did were looked on as queer. Michael's robots were purpose-designed, each to serve its own specific function and to be essentially invisible when not needed. Still, they were designed to learn and to try to please — which is to say their programming was both heuristic and normative — and so they tended to develop personalities, either mimicking their master's or complementing them. Michael Pellica-Perkins's slaves were often petulant. "I can't," the wall replied, in a tone like a pout. "I'm stuck."

"Don't whine," Michael snapped.

"I can't help it. I warned you, Michael. We've got at least twenty circuits down because of equipment malfunction, and I'm one of them."

"Has the repair module broken down too?"

"Of course, not Michael," the wall replied, "but we're just servosystems, we can't do the *impossible*. We can't create parts out of *nothing*. We need raw *materials*. And the catches have been lousy, you know that; so what it comes down to, I not only can't display the view of your choice, I can't even switch over to exterior scan so you can see who's coming to visit you."

Michael's eyes widened. "Visit me? Now? Like this? When I don't even have any clothes on?"

"Right now," the wall confirmed, in gloomy satisfaction. "About a kilometer and a half away, and braking fast."

The kitchen's exterior scan still worked — so Michael found out, bounding from room to room — and he didn't have to worry about his state of dress. It was only Ann. At first he saw only a hydrogen flame, blinding blue-white and coming toward him like a plunging comet, but all the scanning circuits were still in good order. The kitchen wall was able to filter out the bright light, leaving only Ann in her copper-colored spacesuit, riding her thruster like a witch on a broomstick, towing a great metal-cord empty sack to fill with her belongings. Michael pulled on a pair of shorts, not so much for modesty's sake as to define the change in their relationship, and met her as she squeezed through the inner door.

Divorced persons are never easy with each other when they first meet again. Especially when the purpose of the meeting is to finalize the split with a tangible division of property. Michael was surly. Ann was tense. If

she was not the best looking of his wives she was certainly in the top ten: russet hair, gentle green eyes, sweet mouth and all. And distinctly a winner in bed. She was a little taller than Michael, a large, good-humored woman just about his own age.

She fluttered about the rooms of the habitat, bedroom and bar, banquet hall and bath, picking up clothing here and a knickknack there. When, stiffly, Michael offered to help her pack up her net bag she thanked him rather sweetly and rather kindly, and did not seem in any hurry to take him up on it. Or to leave. There was not that much to pack, really. The marriage had only lasted nine days. And the way it had ended had been explosive and furious; bits of the previous night's battle were beginning to come back to Michael, and they made him uneasy. And yet, as he was getting more and more tense, Ann seemed more relaxed. "Have you seen your brother?" she asked, frowning over the hair-dryer in her hand as though unsure of where to put it — but where was there, outside of the bag?

"He called while I was asleep. Haven't called him back yet."

"Uh-huh." She settled the problem of the hair-dryer by putting it on an endtable and sank back in a web chair. The wet bar recognized the pattern of pressure from the chair, identified the occupant and did what it was programmed to do.

"Would you like a drink, Ann?" it offered.

She pursed her lips, considering. "Thank you, no, not this early in the morning."

"Some coffee, then?" the kitchen called, picking up its cue.

"Why, that would be very nice." And when she had the bulb in her hand she leaned back, sipping it placidly. Looking around the habitat as though she were thinking of buying it. As though she were thinking of moving back in.

Michael called for coffee for himself and sat down opposite to look at her. Michael kept his habitat in fairly slow spin, which meant the pseudo-gravity was light, which meant that his furniture could get as deep as he liked; no one would have trouble getting in or out of it. Ann was almost lying flat, her copper tunic open, her knees crossed. "You haven't seen Rodney, then," she said.

"You already asked me about my brother. What's this sudden interest?"

"I just thought maybe you'd talked to him."

"Well, I haven't. It's always the same, anyway. He tells me that I ought to sell my place off and move into something more energy-efficient."

"It would be easier to maintain," she pointed out.

"What do I care if it's easy to maintain? If I wanted that I'd move into an oneill. It's my lifestyle, Ann, and I —" He stopped; the conversation was beginning to sound like a replay of the night before. "Anyway," he

finished, "I haven't seen him. You're looking well," he added.

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry about last night, Ann."

"I am too, Michael." She wrinkled her nose as though amused at something. "On the way over here," she said, "I was thinking that it was all over between us. And then I saw your trap when I came in. I thought maybe you'd finally decided to listen to your brother —"

Michael had begun to frown. "What about my trap?"

"Well, you know. I thought you were one of those bloodthirsty hunters, anything for sport."

"I am one of those bloodthirsty hunters, Ann; and what about my trap?"

"You mean you don't know?" She looked surprised, and then angry.

"Oh, Hell, Michael," she said, standing up to prove how easy it was to get out of those low, comfortable chairs, "I guess I made a mistake. So long, Michael. No, don't bother to help me with the bag, I can handle it by myself." And zip, her coverall was closed, and pop, her helmet was on her head, and she was on the other side of the door and the pumps were beginning to pull out the air in the chamber, with Michael staring after her.

What had gone wrong? It was the kind of question his great-grandparents might have asked, standing on the muddy ruins of their living room in a ravine in Pacific Palisades, looking up to where their house had been. There wasn't any answer to it. Only a decision. Michael realized that the thing he had better do next was take a look at his trap.

At one end of Michael's habitat a wire-mesh live-trap was attached. It was a large thing, a score of meters long, a dozen meters in diameter; it was baited with a radio beacon, and the entrance consisted of a series of three inward-pointing wire-mesh funnels. The catch could get in easily enough, attracted by the radio signals. They were not likely to be able to blunder out again.

Through the electronic scanner inside the habitat Michael could see that day's bag of fifteen slowly squirming metal things. They were called "Noymans", after the ancient scientist who had first proposed constructing them. They were all built to the same plan. The bodies were bright steel cylinders clumped together. Each had a crown of thin, jointed steel feelers that hid the "head", with its voracious mouth and dull, obsessed electronic brain. Each Noyman had about the intelligence of an oyster spawn: it was smart enough for what it had to do. It was programmed to drift through space until it detected the presence of something "edible" — that is, something containing metals or hydrogen-oxygen compounds. Then it homed in and began to assimilate its meal. Drifting meteorite, asteroid, comet core — almost any piece of solid space flotsam would do.

The Noyman's instincts were three: to eat; to reproduce; to return to the vicinity of Earth and home in on a radio beacon. What happened to it after that it did not know. That it was then efficiently captured, dissected, smelted, refined, and shaped into electrical and structural parts did not concern it. It did not care what became of it after it responded to the homing signal, but then it could not be said really to care about what was happening throughout the rest of its tedious existence either. Noymans came in all sizes. The ones which had found the foraging least successful were bundles of no more than a score of thin rods joined together, the whole thing only centimeters in diameter. While those which had fed extravagantly could be huge.

It was a giant that was in Michael's trap, and he roared with rage. "That's a buck!" he shouted.

The grappling mechanism said apologetically, "My instructions were to provide material for maintenance and —"

"My instructions," Michael shouted, "were to release everything of hunting size! That was an *order*!"

Behind him, the central homeostasis systems in his desk said wistfully, "You told me to fix things, Mr. Michael. Mr. Michael? Please, just look at the size of that one. With this much metal we can repair nearly all the inoperative systems."

"No! Let it go!"

Pause. Then the desk said, "Well, Mr. Michael, I'm afraid it's a little too late to release it." Without orders, it increased the magnification on the screen, centering on the flared propulsion jets at the base of the clustered cylinders. Horrified, Michael saw that one side of them had been sliced off neatly, and the cutting torch within the trap was already sectioning the central guidance systems in the frond of feelers at the other end. The buck was already partly melted down; it would never fly again.

There are few evils that do not carry some compensation with them, even if a tiny one — when you die you don't have to pay taxes any more. Michael tried to take comfort in his. He could hear the hiss and whine of his habitat's repair systems, eating up the day's catch, the great crippled buck included. It eased his anger. The buck was furnishing a hundred times more components than any of the tinier specimens. In the hidden workshops of the habitat it was smelted and cast, machined and fitted, fused and doped. It made parts to replace the worn parts, and then the worn parts themselves were thriftily stripped and sorted and smelted and refashioned and laid away. It would be some time before his systems began to break down again.

Not much was actually lost in an orbiting habitat. There was no place for it to be thrown away to. Some things were actually and irrevocably

consumed. Atmosphere had to be replaced, because there was always a tiny leakage when people went in and out. Water, the same. Fuel for Michael's runabout and for the occasional necessary orbital corrections, the same — the fuel, after all, was also water: it was electrolyzed into H_2 and O_2 in the habitat's systems, and then recombined as rocket juice. That was the biggest loss.

Actual solid metals, though, did not leak away or burn up. They would not have been lost at all if it were not for hunting, or for the occasional gashes and slashes where structure was actually scraped away, or through carelessness. Unfortunately, there was a lot of carelessness; and it seemed that it was always the elements that could not be substituted for that disappeared, however carefully the systems of the habitat tried to preserve them. Michael's habitat was thrifty. Michael wasn't.

What made the whole system work was energy. Cheap energy and plenteous. Energy was no problem at all. Michael's habitat, like all the orbiting dwellings, swam in a microwave sea. There was seldom a time when Michael's habitat was not in the direct line of a microwave beam from one of the power satellites. In that rare fraction of an orbit when he was temporarily without outside power, the habitat's storage cells held an ample reserve. The commodity he would never run out of was energy.

He had, however, run out of women. Or so it seemed. He spent nearly an hour reviewing the list of known debts of certain defined physical and mental characteristics, domiciled within commuting range of his habitat. The list was handsomely presented. Michael's message center was not the smartest of his systems — they all operated off the same central data processor — but it was in some ways the most sophisticated. It, like most of Michael's systems, was programmed heuristically, which meant that it observed Michael's responses to what it did and evolved new programs of its own to improve the results.

So the message center wiped the most spacious wall in Michael's living room of its panorama and devoted it to the alphabetical list of debts. With each one there was a brief tabulation of physical characteristics, hobbies and vital statistics, and a series of clips of the debt herself in action. Most Michael passed over; when he indicated interest, the message center dialed her comm number.

It was a very efficient scheme. Unfortunately it did not seem to be producing results. In turn Michael spoke briefly to an Abby, an Adele, two Alices, two Allisons, an Alphonsa and an Amanda, and in no case did the conversation last more than a few sentences on each side. Michael was hard to please; and then, as an Ann appeared and Michael, beginning to slump into lethargy, shrugged and the message center began to make the call, Michael suddenly sat up. "Now strike that!" he snapped angrily. "That's Ann Oberhauser, and she's the one that just moved out."

"I know that, Mr. Michael," the message center said, "but look at those

stats! She's exactly your type. She might change her mind, you know."

"Well, I won't change mine!"

"All right," the message center said sulkily. "If you're *sure*," it added, making no effort to move on to the next name.

"I'm sure! Get on with it! — No, wait a minute," Michael said, suddenly resolute. "I don't have to do this, you know."

"Certainly not, Mr. Michael," the message center agreed; it was well able to recognize a rhetorical remark and did not dissipate its energies trying to find out what Michael had in mind by it. In any case, he made it clear:

"It's a sign of a weak personality," he said firmly, "to jump from one relationship to another without taking time to oneself in between, isn't that right?"

"Quite right, Mr. Michael."

"I don't *have* to have a deb with me every night."

"No, you certainly don't."

"That's right. I can take time to know myself — all day if I like. Even longer. I could go a week by myself and be just fine — in fact," he called to the bedroom, "I've done it in the past, haven't I?"

"Very nearly a week," the bed confirmed, "once."

"I'll just carry on with my normal life, then. Exercise first, I think."

"Yes, Mr. Michael." Obediently the main salon cleared itself for Michael's conditioning routine. The furniture pulled itself back around the median hoop; and, as Michael stepped on it, it began to revolve. At the same time the wall displays went to black; the only light anywhere was on the revolving treadmill itself. It was possible to get used to the difference in stress between foot-level and head; the lighting, however, was critical. Once Michael began to run the track and it accelerated to give him the G-effect he needed, the flickering of external lights would be too distracting.

Michael was not without faults. Physical laziness was not among them. He dutifully ran his full three kilometers, the last part of it at an accelerating tempo that multiplied his exertions, not just because of his speed but because of the added G-force as the treadmill picked up velocity to match his. When he was through he cried, "Cut!" and let himself drop to the cushioned meter-wide hoop. As it reached a stop the wall lights came up again and he was back in his familiar salon, the furnishings gently hitching themselves back to their places.

Michael stood up, breathing hard and sweating harder. "That was great!" he declared. "Now another quick bath — then we'll get down to business!"

The agenda was clearcut, but it contained a basic fault. There wasn't any business. Although Michael Pellica-Perkins was the only reason for the

existence of his habitat, with all its myriad intricate sophistications and ingenuities, it functioned perfectly without him. He wasn't crew. He was a passenger. Like any passenger, he was offered a lavish prospectus of entertainments — games and hobbies, sports and recreations — but none of them made any difference at all. That was just as Michael wanted it, of course. He wanted to be free to pursue the interests of the moment, with no damned nonsense about fixing things around the house.

But basically his most interesting interests had to do with other people, and of those there was a shortage. Nothing stopped him from going to visit a friend, of course. But it would save some irritating discussions if he held off on social calls for a few days, until the word that he and Ann were split got around. So he played a couple of games of 3-D chess against his tourney board, but that wasn't much fun. He had the choice of setting it to play below his own level of skill, which took the exultation out of victory, or of losing, which was no fun at all. He played with his collection of model spacecraft, but the best part of them was showing them to someone else. Like Ann. She had really been impressed by them, and almost as impressed by his full sun and moon display in the bedroom, and somewhat impressed by the ten thousand liter water tank they swam in . . . and then not much impressed at all by the fern garden, or the exercise track, or the full health-club equipment. . . . But he didn't want to think about Ann.

What else was there to think about? His calls! Of course! But most of them were sales robots, and he wasn't in the mood to entertain a dozen appliance vendors. The only real, live human being was his brother. Michael was not much in the mood for another tiresome lecture from his brother, either.

Rodney Mazzacco-Perkins was not Michael's full brother. They did have a mother in common. They did have a shared memory of early childhood together — Michael's childhood, actually, because Rodney was eight years older and was off on his own before Michael was ten. They had not got along particularly well as children, and got along even worse as grownups. Michael prided himself on the macho virtues. Rodney was a toiler. He was a boring toiler, as well, too unselfish to keep his conscience to himself, unfailing in offering its commandments to those nearby. So Michael avoided being nearby. Rodney saw gloom where Michael saw sport; he saw a steady running down of the human spirit and a terrible dissipation of human resources; his favorite word was "entropy"; and he could really kill a party. About the only friend of Michael's who had ever seemed to like him was Ann; and that, Michael thought bitterly, told you all you needed to know about Ann.

Having thought all of which, he said, "I might as well get it over with. Return my brother's call."

"That's surprising," the message center commented as it wiped one

display wall clean for the call.

"I didn't ask for an opinion. Just get my brother."

"I can't," the message center smirked. "There's a forwarding on his code. Just a second, Mr. Michael — yes, here you are."

The person who gazed out at Michael was not his brother at all. It was someone quite unlikely. "Ann!" Michael cried. "What are you doing in Rodney's dump?"

"Oh, Mr. Michael," the message center whispered reproachfully, "I told you it was a forwarded call —" just as Ann said:

"I'm not at Rodney's. I'm just taking his calls. What do you want?"

Whatever had annoyed her earlier in the day, she seemed to be over it. Not very friendly. Simply disinterested. She gazed calmly at Michael as though he were the most casual of acquaintances as he explained, huffily, that he was simply, as a matter of common courtesy, returning his brother's call, and it was just like his brother not to be there to receive it. "So where is old Rodney?" he demanded — it was hard to get far enough away to be out of automatic call-forwarding distance.

"Away."

"Well, I figured that out for myself! *Where* away?" Then a sudden worry struck him. "He hasn't — I mean, he isn't *sleeping*?"

He did not have to explain which particular kind of sleeping he meant. If it had been the normal kind, he simply would have got his brother's own message center, and it would simply have told him so. But that other kind of sleep, the long-term estivative slumber that had been developed for prospective travelers to other stars — there had been any number of persons Michael knew, whose boredom with the life they lived did not extend quite to suicide, but was too great to let them go on with their daily tedium. There were supposed to be two or three hundred of them in the big suspension satellite in the L-6 position.

"Of course not! What a stupid idea," Ann said indignantly. Then she hesitated, her expression softening. "Was there anything *special* you wanted to say to him? About, you know, any of the things he's been talking to you about?"

Michael chuckled at the idea. "Just calling him back to see what crackpot thing he's up to now," he explained.

"I'll tell him you called." The frost was back in her voice, and in her expression as she broke the contact and faded away; and what a bummer this day was turning out to be.

Michael sighed. "Give me something *nice* to eat," he ordered the kitchen, and to the message center: "And start displaying the debts again. Not the beginning of the alphabet, though — I've probably been over them too many times already. Let's start in the middle."

But that wasn't any good, either. There was something, Michael was

nearly sure, that would brighten his life for him, but he couldn't think what it was. Meanwhile the list of debts whose names began with **M** was not a bit more inspiring than the **As**. Mabel Stiles. Magdalen Savage. Maggie Weeden. Marguerite Jenner. Mary Taylor — "Hey, back up a second," he commanded, intrigued. Magdalen Savage had looked a lot like her name, with a cheerful sluttishness around the eyes and a crude thickness to the lips. "Just call them one after another till I find the right one," he ordered, "starting with *her*."

But Magdalen Savage was much older than her picture or her deceitful vital statistics; and Maggie Weeden was temporarily married and not taking calls; and Marguerite didn't seem to like Michael himself very much; and Mary, he remembered tardily as he was in the course of greeting her, had been his wife for nearly two weeks the year before. "Oh, sorry," he said, "wrong number. Nice talking to you." And to the message center: "The Hell with that. Let's think of something else."

"Do you want to try the letter **Z**, just for luck?" the message center inquired.

"No. Shut up. Let me think." He thought gloomily that he could go on playing the directory of debts all day without finding one he liked. There were so many of them! Some he had never met, many that he half remembered — a quick conversation at a party, or brushing up against them in a hunt or a tournament. Those were the places where you could form personal impressions, he thought morosely, and really get to know each other before you committed to anything. . . .

"Why not?" he cried out loud, suddenly enlightened.

"Why not what, Mr. Michael?" the message center asked.

"Why not do it! We've got plenty of supplies now — right, kitchen?"

"Plenty," the kitchen called.

"So we could generate a breakfast for at least twenty or thirty people, right? And all the systems are operative again, right? And you'll have that buck cut up and stored out of sight in the next couple of hours, right?"

"Yes, Mr. Michael. Three times right," the message center acknowledged.

"Then we'll do it! We'll host a hunt!" Michael cried, "Send out the invitations right away!"

If Michael Pellica-Perkins had been dreaming at this particular moment in his life, there would have been a smile on his sleeping face. *This* was his dream. This was the thing he lived for. All the irritations of the day before were wiped out of his mind. If there was anything more quintessentially delightful than riding to a hunt itself, it was the hunt breakfast. Michael's great dining hall, twelve meters long, hung with emerald drapes, ornamented with the tendriled nose cones of four fine

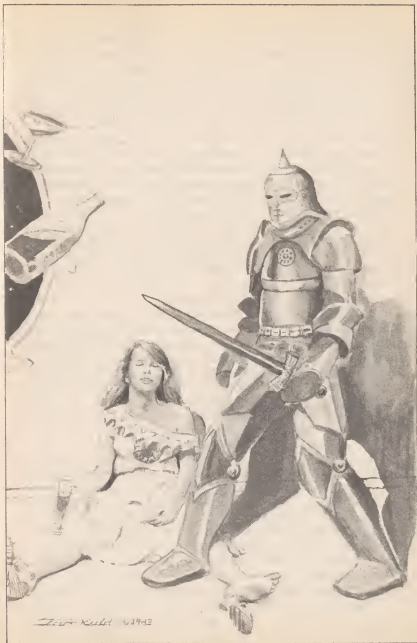
earlier kills, was filling up with the brightest, bravest, most amusing human beings alive. They were direct descendants of the British sub-alterns who speared tigers from elephants, or the hunt-masters of the days when the British countryside knew what to do with itself for pleasure. The repaired entertainment systems were optimal again. They had been working all night. Champagne was ready, bubbling and chilled, and the sideboards groaned — well, no, did not really groan; not in the pull of Michael's gentle spin — but at least were laden with patés and steaming dishes that looked more like kippers and kidneys and rashers of bacon than the real thing ever had. The noise level from the sound system grew to match the noise of chatter and laughter and excitement. As he went to the door to welcome Bert Sigler and his lovely wife, whatever her name was, Michael glanced at the display wall. There were at least a dozen steeds in the guest rack, and almost every one of them had kills emblazoned on their jet shafts — the little decals of quarries taken that signified status among the bloods. By convention the decals were drawn a quarter actual size — if so, some of the bucks must have been monsters! You never saw them that big any more. . . .

But that was a gloomy thought, and Michael banished it. "Hello, Everett," he said to the ranking DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® champion, coming in alone and already prospecting the debts in the room. "Nice to see you, Marlene," he told the woman behind him. He began to wonder if his habitat would hold any more — but that was part of the pleasure of it. The crowding, the jostling, the high spirits — the celebrities! That jet-black man, almost the color of ripe plums at twilight — he was the croquet champion of cislunar space, and space croquet, played in three dimensions where a ball kicked away could go a million miles, was not for weaklings!

And then there were the debts.

Michael had not forgotten what made him decide on the party in the first place. It was a host's job to circulate, and he did, but he made sure to circulate most frequently where the most interesting-looking women were. It wasn't easy to tell as much as he would have liked about the way some of them looked, because everyone, of course, was in hunt gear. No helmets, of course; they were all racked by the door. But there were metal-fiber body stockings in every color and pattern, garb made to look like a wet suit, comic garb like red flannel long-johns, flexible copies of the sort of suits the first astronauts had worn. There was even one woman who wore something that looked like knightly armor, lacking only the helmet; as Michael came closer to her he realized she was Magdalen Savage, her handsome face even more lined in person than on his display. "Nice costume," he said admiringly. "More champagne?" But when he had passed her a fresh globe he moved on, looking for someone younger. Or prettier. Or anyway newer.





The air circulators were doing their best, but there were nearly forty people in the room now. And there was something wrong with the centrifugal gravity; Michael felt as though he were in an elevator gently lifting and dropping. The young woman he had been pursuing turned to him with an expression of disdain. "What's the matter with your habitat, Michael?" she asked. Her tone was the sort you might have used to a robot. Michael shrugged, and then she pointed to his exterior display. "Is that it?"

"What?" All he saw was the stacked steeds — and beyond them a distant, tiny glitter of silver, much too large to be a habitat, even an oneill — Of course: it was the photon-sail ship, practicing rigging its propulsion systems for whenever the day might come that it would in fact take off on the long slow drift to another star. "Bunch of dreamers," he said.

"No, dummy, not the sailship. Your parking rack."

"Oh! Yes, I see," said Michael, and in fact he did. There were so many mounts stacked outside the entrance now that they had unbalanced his habitat's rotation; the center of gravity was no longer the center of his banqueting hall, and so the centrifugal pull was no longer a steady, known force you could accept and forget about.

An annoyance — but Michael grinned. The party was at its peak anyway. The couple of guests who were smoking tobacco and the dozen with dope were giving everyone a contact high, and the noise was becoming nearly painful. People were rubbing against each other; consecutive conversation was impossible. Michael saw a chunk of paté escape a guest's knife and, instead of settling gently back to the board, float into the collar of a male guest's hunting garb; a sip of champagne, escaped from someone's bulb, was sprinkling a dozen others —

"It's time!" Michael cried; and as everyone turned to him, he shouted: "On with the hunt!"

By the time they were well launched, the hunt was dispersed through a volume of a cubic kilometer of space. Spectacular sight! Each mount rode on its jet of flame, each huntsman's helmet flashed the color-coded identity signal. The bright Sun was just dropping toward the western limb of the Earth below. In minutes they would be in the umbra, and then their skin temperatures would start to fall from a hundred degrees above zero to two hundred below — but then there would be no risk of even a small, unforecast solar flare. . . .

Not that any of the three score of them was thinking of solar flares. The hunt! That was the thing. Michael listened to the radio chatter, watched the flares of the rest of the chase — at an average separation of less than two hundred and fifty meters you had to be careful — but most of all he watched the telltale readouts inside his helmet for the radio song of a

buck.

The trick of the hunt was threefold: to slant your mount to where the buck was going to be when you got there; to spear the buck cleanly, so that your point punctured its propellant tank and your barb held it firm; and to refrain from spearing another hunter. Or being speared by one. Or drifting into another's high-temperature exhaust. And all the time you heard the yoicks and halloos of the rest of the hunt screaming in your ears, drowning the warbling of the distant bucks that were too far away to be quarry — but might be coming nearer! — and you were screaming yourself half the time, no matter how experienced you were. And you were half the time in stark hot sun and the other half in black shade as you turned, and your faceplate never reacted fast enough so that at critical moments you were the next damn thing to blind — roll on, sunset! Then at least one of the problems would stop being a worry. And watch out most of all for the main-channel microwave beams, the ones that connected the power satellite nets, or fed juice to the oneills . . . so that you wouldn't be fried instead of the buck.

But that was the sport of it. Those risks, those split-second decisions, the trained reflexes, that congeries of skills, those were the things that made one man a champion for the day and everyone else nothing at all! It was what Michael had organized his life around, or the parts of his life that were worth living, anyway. It had taken him eighteen years, from his first toddler's hunt after pent, under-size pigs in the family habitat's trap, to the first free-flying chase, strapped to the jumpseat on his mother's mount, holding with one hand to his mother's suit while the other brandished his baby spear, until now. Kills blazoned on his mount, trophies in his banquet hall, and the respect and admiration of everyone he knew — well, almost everyone. Everybody but the weirdos, like Ann and his brother. The hunt was where it was all at.

But the hunt, unfortunately, depended crucially on the presence of one thing: quarry. Big ones. And sometimes there weren't any big ones to be found.

Michael swore to himself, thinking about the big one his habitat had trapped. "Quiet down!" he snarled into the transmitter. "Give us a chance to hear the quarry!"

The chatter dwindled — less because of what Michael had said than because the hunt was running out of that first hot joy. He listened, watching his helmet instrument readouts — yes, there were calls. But high-pitched, meaning immature ones, and faint, meaning still distant. The cloud of hunters winked one by one into blackness as they sailed into the Earth's shadow. Now Michael could pick out the colors of individual beacons. Red-white-red was Everett Mbaranga, blue-blue the woman named Magdalen, blue-blue-green a man whose name he didn't remember, but who had been one of the first to arrive. They were the

nearest. The others were tinier and dister flashes: green-white, green-green-yellow, red-yellow, all the colors there were, and behind them the steady, unmoving colors of the myriad, myriad stars. The Moon was on the far side of the Earth now, but they were approaching one of the power satellites — safe enough, if you watched yourself, and sometimes a good place to find quarry confused by the microwave emissions. Through the struts of the immense rectenna Michael could see the dreaming night-time Earth, black and mottled with rare, almost-black patches of sullen dark red. All around the disk of the Earth the faint halo told of the Sun on the other side. It was an awesomely beautiful spectacle, but it lacked what Michael most wanted to see.

There were no bucks in sight.

There were no bucks' squeals in his headphones, either; though the sound from the other hunters was beginning to pick up again. Some female voice — Michael could not place it — was humming softly to itself, somebody else sneezing, a distant male voice peevishly warning someone to stay clear. The humming was annoying; there was no excuse for it. Michael smacked his lips to activate his transmitter and said, "Whoever the woman is making that racket, please shut up."

The hummer finished a phrase, then spoke. "What a nasty temper you do have, Michael," she said mildly.

"I can't hear the quarry with all your racket!"

"There's no quarry to hear," she pointed out — and then Michael recognized her. It was her sweet and reasonable voice she was using, the one in which she had explained to him that his way of life was childish.

It was, in a word, Ann.

"What are you doing here?" he shouted.

Low, distant laugh. "You sent out a general invitation, Michael."

"But you don't *hunt*. You don't do any of those childish, wasteful, sickening things you were telling me about!"

No answer at all this time, not even a laugh. Michael jerked his head around, trying to see where she was. What were her confounded helmet colors? Something complicated, he remembered — green-yellow-red-green? One of those four and five-blink things that showed the owner seldom went out for sports, but traveled only from point to point where it didn't matter if you could recognize or be recognized. He kned his mount on the right side and kicked with his heel; the jets thrust him forward and relative-up in a left-hand spiral, toward the densest cluster of riding lights —

And then the headphones picked up a whisper — then a growing, warbling sound — Buck! And a big one, by the cry!

Instantly his companions in the hunt drowned the sound out with their yells, Magdalen's contralto "Tally-ho!" and Everett's "View halloo!" barely beating out the calls of the others. Sixty blue-white comets sprang

up in space as every member of the hunt kicked his mount and the jets flared — all arrowing toward the same spot, where the cross-hairs of all direction-finders met.

This was where skill counted. Hard riding, nervy thrusts, quick, cold reflexes. Michael was at the far end of the cluster of huntsmen and even worse, vectored nearly a hundred and fifty degrees wrong. He kicked his mount around, swiftly calculated moments of force and let it rip. Michael's brute steed made a difference. It was a beast; it possessed delta-Vs that most mounts did not own and few riders would dare; mounts like that were dangerous. You could be thrown. You could run out of propellant with a bunch of residual velocity that would carry you a long way from home, and have to scream for help — you could even wind up too far and too fast for the rest of the hunt to reach you, and maybe even your own habitat out of range; and then maybe you would never be found at all. It had happened. But, when you could handle it, a blown-out, charged-up mauler gave you an edge.

Michael could handle it. The attitude thrusters bucked him to the right orientation. The main jets cut in. The acceleration surge ground him back into the bucket saddle — nearly five Gs he was pulling, and the pressure collar at the base of his neck swelled quickly to block the flow of blood from his brain. Even so he was dizzy for a moment, and the confused roaring in his ears could have been hallucination.

It wasn't hallucination; it was real. The nearest huntsmen were in visual range now, and they were shouting. Other voices joined in, and though there were too many of them, so that Michael could not hear the words, he could recognize the tone: shock, wonder, dismay. The blood flowed back to his brain. His vision cleared. He saw the spark of green that marked the quarry on his helmet visor. He could not see the buck itself, but he saw where it was.

A great skeletal bedspring of struts and wires, kilometers long, more than a kilometer wide. A power satellite. And the buck was hanging there, drifting through the guts of the rectenna, making no attempt to escape, screaming its head off.

Michael Pellica-Perkins was neither stupid nor badly educated. In the subjects which interested him, he was soundly informed. The microcircuitry of his habitat did not interest him at all — it was designed to maintain itself without any help from its occupant — and so he did not know a Josephson junction from a thumbtack. He had never, as far as he knew, seen either. But a Von Neumann Self-Replicating Automaton was something else. If he did not know them under that name, he knew them as Noymans, as bucks, as pigs — as quarry. A Noyman was the hardware equivalent of a germ. It browsed, grew, reproduced, and died. It accumulated nothing, neither property nor wisdom. Like a germ, it left nothing

to its offspring except instructions on how to be like itself. Like a germ, those "genetic" instructions sometimes were garbled in transmission. Not much. If the encoding was too far wrong, reproduction simply did not occur, or the results simply did not function — as with a germ. But small errors could be tolerated. In a Darwinian sense those "errors" accounted for selection under environmental pressure and thus for evolution. Perhaps they would have for the Noymans, too, if there were world enough and time; but the first Noymans had been seeded into space not much more than a century before and nothing that could be called evolutionary would happen for a few dozen millennia, at least. What those small encoding errors meant to a Noyman was that it did not respond quite properly to its programming; it failed to home on its beacons, or it attempted to assimilate a habitat instead of allowing itself to be disassembled to repair it, or it did not return to cislunar space at all — they said there were tens of thousands of Noymans chomping away at the asteroids, never coming back to be harvested. There was a name for such "errors" in the vocabulary of the hunt. They were called "rogues."

Michael was the first of the hunt to say it. "Rogue!" he yelled. "Watch yourselves!" You never knew what a rogue would do; the very fact that it had blundered into the power satellite showed that its programming had gone sour, the fact that it remained there, in that high-energy photon sea, confirmed it. There was a confused chorus from the others, but Michael was no longer listening. For the other thing about a rogue was that it was the most challenging quarry there was.

Michael recomputed in his head, threw out his assumed velocity-of-target, estimated anew on a stationary quarry, and flashed in between two other hunters, who checked and braked thrust, sliding off past the main girders and away from the rectenna. But not all of the hunt was cautious. Michael could see the I.D. lights of three or four others, skittering in and out of the metalwork, beaming headlamps into shadows, lances ready.

It was a purely visual search now. With all that metal and all that microwave energy, the RDFs were liars. The crosshairs flickered here and there on the faceplate, sometimes showing three targets at once, sometimes thirty, mostly showing nothing but a spiderweb of half-formed lines that grew and faded irresolutely. That was part of the needed skill, too — reading the RDFs when the RDFs were confused, and especially knowing when to forget you had them at all. To spear a rogue buck, think like one! Think yourself confused and uncertain, programming unreliable, responses unready.

So Michael dived straight for the vast bedspring itself.

The rectenna was far huger than even an oneill, a vast orbiting island of Manhattan — though Michael had never seen Manhattan — and every second, it handled an energy flux of a hundred thousand kilowatts. Since it was one of the most efficient machines Man or his robot servants ever

made, the leakage was less than one thousandth of one per cent — but that came easily to enough juice to cook a hunter in his pressure suit, if it all happened to leak in the same place. And sometimes it did; so that was where you needed the huntsman's other essential ingredient: courage. Michael dived within meters of the wire itself, where faint fire glowed from the points of metal and his radiation monitors began to cheep desperately, mistaking the bleed-off of electricity for the first warning precursors of a solar flare. That cheeping sound was not one you usually ignored. The first thing you learned, when you got your first grownup-sized skinsuit, was to run for home at the first cheep.

But not, of course, when you were nighttime, with twelve thousand kilometers of rock parasol between you and any solar flare: Override another reflex!

The I.D. stars were blinking all around him now, as the rest of the hunt regained enough courage to creep in after the first few valiant ones. Too close! There were near collisions, and shouts of warning or fear in the headphones. Then a woman's shout — Magdalen's? — "Got 'im! Tally-ho!" And red-white-red shot past him, into the heart of the bedspring.

For a moment Michael automatically extrapolated the blue comet-tail of her exhaust to the cluster of structural members ahead and was certain she would collide. Not quite. The rectenna was made of more than eighteen million hexagonal elements, closely fitted together; but it was built and launched in sections, and where the sections were joined together there were gaps. Not big. Big enough, and Diana was arrowing toward one — *through* the rectenna! out into empty space beyond it!

Michael swore unbelievably. Damn buck! They *never* went on the Earthward side of the power satellites! Their propulsive systems were too weak to risk in a closer orbit; that was part of their most basic programming.

But where the quarry went, there went Michael Pellica-Perkins. Even as he was kicking his mount around to follow he was snapping off all his automatic warning systems and instruments. He knew what was ahead. He ignored the babble in the headphones, ignored the lying readings of his RDF, concentrated on snaking his way through the path Magdalen had found.

Then he saw it. Big one! Ten meters long at least! A trophy worth anyone's wall! His faceplate was clear, and he could see the quarry, the broad dark Earth behind it, the red-white-red of Magdalen's I.D. blinker. She was in trouble; her jet flashed and stopped, flashed again; she had failed to allow for the mighty flux of microwave energy whose path they were both now solidly in. Michael heard faint whisperings in his earphones and felt the prickle of static electricity. It was not a place to stay in for very long! Out at the edge of the power satellite behind him he saw a cluster of lights that resolved themselves into a shuttlecraft with skin-

suiting figures around it — not hunters and thus not of any interest to Michael — but the more daring of the rest of the hunt were beginning to slip through the wire behind him.

If they were not as careful as Michael, they would soon be as helpless as Magdalen; the thing to do was to end the hunt and get it over with. He shouted with pleasure; it was time for Michael Pellica-Perkins to show them how to do it!

So they saw. They saw Michael, in the full microwave flux, arrowing in toward the torpedo-shaped quarry while Magdalen bobbed indecisively around, a hundred meters away. It looked like a classic clean kill: quick, savage thrust and bear the buck away, yelling triumph. But Michael didn't thrust. He threw. He never came closer than twenty meters to the quarry, but he hurled his lance like a harpoon as he flashed past, putting on speed to get away — for the buck was *wrong*. The size was impressive, a hundred cells at least; the behavior was normal enough — bucks often hung helpless and dumb for that last coup de grace. But the shape! It was not the clean torpedo lines of the standard Noyman; it was squatter, fatter, almost lemon-shaped.

Which meant that it was a special-purpose Noyman of some kind; the kind that sometimes held radionuclides, sometimes even stranger things. You did not get too close to such a buck if you didn't want your hair to fall out and your teeth to loosen; you killed it clean for the sake of the record, and left it dead for the scavengers to collect for its contents. So he killed it. Killed it deader than he had planned, for the lance hit the propellant tanks.

There is no noise in space, so there was no thundering blast. But the buck exploded, white actinic glare and savage chunks of metal flying. It left a gap meters across in the rectenna, with red and blue-white sparks snapping across the spaces. It lit the power satellite and the hunters and the shuttlecraft like a strobe. And one chunk came flying in a very wrong direction. There are six Cartesian directions, with an infinite number of vectors between; the flying chunk could have been thrust in any of them, but the direction it took was straight toward Michael. It was unlikely it would hit him. He did not take the chance. He kicked his mount savagely, whirled with all the power of the attitude thrusters and poured on the main thrust. All that power! Too much to be handled so carelessly. He was thrown — thrown like a beginner on his first ride, struck by the mount itself, knocked off into free space; the last thing he remembered was the beginning of a terrible headache, and amazement that he could have been so clumsy. And Ann's voice crying his name.

“**A**re you all right?”

Michael gazed up at the bearded man's face that hung over him. It was

not a sympathetic-looking face. It looked angry and scared . . . and disappointed, too; the combination was more than Michael could unravel. "Of course I'm all right," he said, and knew immediately that he had lied. His head hurt and his chest felt as though he had been coughing for weeks; there was something wrong with his nostrils, and when he touched them with a finger they seemed to have dried blood in them.

"You're lucky!" snarled the man with the beard. "A lot luckier than you deserve — you and those other idiots — if I had my way you'd all —"

"Leave him alone for a minute, Chet," said another voice, and Michael saw that he was in a small habitat of some kind — or, no, not a habitat; a workshop? A storage space? A *ship*? "Belt up, you Michael," the second man said. "We've already deorbited. We'll be getting first penetration in about ten minutes."

Michael raised himself cautiously — he was in zero-G, he discovered, and had to catch at the seat he was in to keep from flying away. "Is Ann here?"

"Ann? There's no woman here," said Chet, beard trembling in anger. "Just shuttle crew."

"*Shuttle* crew." It took a moment for the sense to penetrate. "Good heavens!" he cried. "What am I doing in a shuttle?"

"We picked you up. Your helmet was cracked and you were losing pressure —"

"I've got to get off!"

"Get off how?" Chet demanded triumphantly. "We had to deorbit or lose our landing window; we couldn't wait for help. Don't worry; we told your half-witted friends we were taking you down."

"*Down?*"

The beard nodded. "To the surface. Now belt up, or you'll scramble your silly brains even sillier when we hit the atmosphere."

Part of the reason for the hostility in the ship Michael understood. These were the oxen, the people who liked to work. Naturally they hated gentry — it had been thus always, when the English farmers raged against the foxhunt, when the New Jersey orchardists posted their land against pheasant hunters, probably when the Romans and the Greeks trampled crops as they speared boars. That accounted for the anger and resentment. The fear? The disappointment? No, there was some other reason for that.

And, as far as anger was concerned, Michael felt on very strong moral grounds: he had more right to anger than they! They were *kidnaping* him. They had no *right*. Orbit to ground ballistics were no subject of Michael's; but he knew perfectly well, as everyone in a space habitat knew, that if you missed one landing opportunity you only had to wait ninety minutes or so for the next — they could have waited that long!

They *should* have. He, or any of his friends, would have done as much for them, even though they were that contemptible kind of human being who *worked*, like *robots*, for God's sake, instead of devoting themselves to the truly human pursuits that Michael himself enjoyed. Michael was not prejudiced against work, really. Some of his best friends worked. One was a dentist. One decorated habitat interiors. One even had helped design the photon-sail ship that, any week now, was going to start off to explore whatever the name of that star was for whatever planets it might have — of course, Michael and he had lost touch some time ago, because their interests simply did not coincide that much any more. But one expected *courtesy*. Even from an ox.

It was true of course, that in some sense these particular oxen might be said to have saved his life.

He groaned as the shuttle began to buck and shudder. "Are you all right?" called one of the oxen.

He made a vaguely affirmative noise. Actually, he wasn't all right, or anything near it. A high-G turn on a steed was one thing: you could handle that with skill and courage and muscle, but this was like being shaken in a giant popcorn-popper, and it went on and on. He was glad for the restraining straps. Without them he would have been thrown all over the little cabin. But they dug into him, cut his shoulders, squeezed his arms; worst of all, they pressed his aching chest like a medieval torture machine. He must have lost a lot of pressure, he realized; lucky he hadn't caught an embolism, lucky somebody like the shuttle crew had been there to pick him up. But he didn't feel lucky.

No one could consider himself lucky if he was on his way down to the surface of the Earth.

Of course, he told himself, wincing and gasping, it would only be long enough to turn around and catch a return shuttle. They operated quite frequently — didn't they? At least sometimes. And anyway it would be a sort of adventure to tell the debts at the next party, almost as exciting as volunteering for the interstellar ship. . . .

Now, where had that thought come from? It had something to do with Ann. It was part of that long argument they'd had before she left. It was a joke, of course, he was sure it was a joke; but she'd asked what he thought of the photon-sail ship. Bunch of dreamers, he'd said contemptuously; and then she'd flared up. Why shouldn't human beings dream?, she demanded.

And then it had gone on from there. Of course human beings should dream. He would never dream in that particular direction himself. The photon ship was going to take off for — for — oh, yes, the name came back to him: Lalande's star, it was called, known to have planets, believed that the planets were in the Mars-Earth size range and thus maybe, possibly, with any luck at all, as an outside chance habitable. Drone observations

had made it sound more or less hopeful. Michael admitted that getting there would be pretty marvelous. But the *process* of getting there — how wearisome! Eighteen years. And eighteen years back. You would have to be the kind of person who could be happy in an oneill to stand that. True, some people had actually signed up for it; but they were mostly older ones — in their thirties and forties, a couple even older. So they really couldn't leave until they got some breeding stock, and breeding stock was like Michael and Ann and Magdalen and Everett — they liked what they had! They weren't the oneill types, content to live cheek by jowl with forty others for eighteen interminable years. No, he told Ann, starfarers weren't his kind of people, they were almost as bad as the LTGs. . . .

And then the shouting really started, because Ann, it seemed, was pretty close to being a limits-to-growth fanatic herself. You couldn't blame him for getting really angry at that kind of talk. He had had enough of it from his own brother, for Heaven's sake. . . .

"We're coming in," called one of the crewmen over his shoulder; and Michael came out of his reverie to realize three things: First, the buffeting had long since stopped. Second, they were indeed coming in for a landing; he could feel the vessel bumping and clattering as its wheels came down. And third, he was in his underwear.

The surface of the Earth was no longer green and pleasant. A century or so of space shuttles had shredded the ozone layer. Reject heat from fusion plants had turned the lakes and streams into hot tubs; and even the great world-girdling ocean, warming up, was beginning to melt away the undersides of the North Polar floes and the Antarctic glaciers. The last of the fossil fuels had filled the skies with combustion compounds and particulates; and the view from Michael's window, as the shuttle bumped toward a disembarkation dock, was of something like a sooty Sahara.

Since he was not planning to stay there long enough for it to matter, it did not greatly interest him; and besides he had other things on his mind. "Why did you take my skinsuit off?" he demanded of the bearded man as they all began to unsnap their belts.

"Just to save your life, Mike. This way," said the bearded man, opening a hatch.

"But I can't go around in my skivvies!"

"Rent a suit," suggested the man, pointing Michael toward a corridor with signs that said things like Customs and Health Control and Immigration, "There's a Hertz counter out there, I think," he added, beginning to turn away.

"Hey! You mean by myself? Can't I stay with you?"

"We're *crew*," the bearded man explained; and although Michael was not sure what that meant he could see no way to argue it. Suddenly he was alone. There were not that many immigrants coming to Earth these days,

it seemed, because the long corridors were vacant. So, when he came to them, were the halls where luggage carrouseles had once deposited the bags of returning space tourists. The room was absolutely silent, except for his own footsteps. . . .

Which, it turned out, were enough to trigger the activation circuits of a robot immigration guard. As Michael approached, the creature lifted itself from a seat at one of the counters and gestured Michael toward it. "Passport?" he barked.

Michael regarded him with astonishment. It was not as though he had never seen a robot before. Actually he had seen quite a few, though only as traveling door-to-door salesmen, or as somebody's idea for a kinky way to decorate a habitat. But in Michael's world robots were *never* in a position to take that tone to a human being. "I don't have a passport," he said frostily.

The robot did not seem surprised. He was a huge one, Michael realized, towering over Michael and probably outweighing him at least four to one. Michael's own weight was giving his tottering knees about all they could handle in this gross Earth gravity; he was grateful not to weigh more. "Anything to declare?" the robot asked.

"What does that mean?"

The robot frowned. "You don't ask what that means," it explained. "You just say 'yes' or 'no.' Yes means you have something that's illegal to bring in or that you have to pay duty on. No means you don't."

"I'll say no," Michael decided.

"Thank you, sir." The robot reached under the counter and handed Michael a printed yellow form. The paper crackled alarmingly in Michael's fingers. It seemed to be years old at least, maybe decades. "Hand this to the guard on your way out," the robot ordered, and returned to immobility.

The next chamber was as empty as the first, and the guard at the door was another robot, in the same uniform as the other, and in the same condition. It too roused itself out of standby mode as it heard the sound of Michael's approach, took the printed form and scanned it, touched its cap and relapsed into standby as Michael pushed through the exit door.

He was in a large, vaulted lobby, as silent as any that had gone before. Once this place had been a major space terminal. Obviously the traffic had dwindled far below the point where all this space served any function, or where it could maintain the shops and services that had once been all about. A sign before him said **Koffee Kounter**, but under it was nothing but a rolled-down corrugated-metal door with another sign: **Closed**. Counters bore legends like **National Rent-a-Suit** and **Hotel and Motel Reservations** and **Limousine Services**. None of them were manned, and when Michael picked up the limousine phone, and then the one at the hotel counter, both were dead. The only sign of movement in

the whole lobby was a winking digital clock at the bottom of a great liquid-crystal dispatchers' board. One side was headed ARRIVALS, and it was blank. The other, DEPARTURES, had a single line illuminated below it. At 1355 on the 17th a passenger shuttle was due from Orbiting Station Candy. But the time hack at the bottom of the board told Michael that that was more than a week away. Meaning, no doubt, a week before any of those services advertised all around him became available again.

It occurred to Michael that it might be pretty dull in this place for a solid week . . . just before it occurred to him that, in a solid week in a place like this, a person might come pretty close to starving. There was not even the hope that he might have something left and forgotten in his pockets; he had no pockets, nothing but the underbriefs he had worn beneath the skinsuit.

He was quite completely impoverished — a concept that had never, as a tangible potentiality, occurred to Michael Pellica-Perkins before.

A brisk sound of voices, faint but definite, came from somewhere outside the building. Michael was galvanized into hope. He sprang to the windows, which were quite dirty, peering out into the unpleasantly sulfurous-looking outdoors, and caught a glimpse of three human figures. The crew from his shuttlecraft? *Maybe* they were the crew; he could not tell; all of them were wearing mirror-bright globular helmets against the rank air, and their features were not visible. "Hey!" Michael shouted, realized they could not possibly hear, then searched desperately for a doorway. It was there. He pushed through a revolving door, sprinted across a wide antechamber, pushed through another —

And stopped, gagging and coughing. Great orange flakes of something harsh-smelling and worse-tasting were drifting down on him out of a dirty lemon sky. Michael had never smelled anything like it. It was like breathing fire. He saw, dimly, through the sullied air, a vehicle pulling away. Its occupants did not see him, or were not interested.

He did not wait to see it disappear. As fast as he could, he stumbled back through the outer revolving doors to regroup.

His knees were shaking. His thigh and calf muscles were incredibly sore. His feet were beginning to hurt, and his ankles to betray him. Cough though he would, he could not get the acrid stench of this world's atmosphere out of his already painful lungs. If this was the mother planet, how wise he had been to stay in orbit!

And — was there any way to get back there?

He pushed hopelessly through the inner doors and stood in the empty lobby . . . and became aware of a whisper that seemed to come from everywhere: "— white courtesy telephone," it said in a sweet and sexless voice, and then was still. For a moment he hoped. But it was not a human voice.

And then hope came back as the message repeated itself:

"Arriving passenger Michael Pellica-Perkins. For arrangements to meet your party, please pick up the white courtesy telephone."

The phone, when he found it, did not appear to have been touched for years; the message repeated itself three times before he was able to figure out how to make this antique instrument work. When he identified himself into it, the same gender-free voice asked him to wait one moment for his party's message, and then there was another voice.

This one he recognized. "I'm glad you're here safe and sound, Michael," it said, and hurried right on. "Go to the baggage claim area. There's a covered hatchway vehicle entrance; go through the hatch and you'll find a car waiting. The driver's name is Gideon and he'll bring you here to me. . . . 'Me'," it went on, a touch of sarcasm in the tone, "in case you've forgotten what I sound like since you don't return my calls any more, is your brother, Rodney."

All orbital launch stations, Michael knew, were on the Equator, or as near to it as geography allowed. Why this was so he was far less sure. It had something to do with conserving rotational energy, and something to do, too, with avoiding something called Coriolis force. Michael had never considered it necessary to learn what a Coriolis force was, but he had retained the knowledge that if you were ever so silly as to go down to the surface of the Earth, you would find yourself in the tropics. Therefore he was in the tropics now.

He also knew what the tropics looked like, because among the many scenes for his view walls were loops of the Amazon jungle, monkeys and bright-colored birds and steamy vines dangling from richly foliated trees, and of some African savanna — antelopes being stalked by great cats — and a South Seas island with laughing, beautiful dark women launching canoes into the surf.

None of that looked in any way like what he was seeing outside the car window. Nothing else in his experience did, either, except possibly a party view he had once seen in somebody else's habitat, called "Pittsburgh Steel Mills, 1910." The only thing that was right, or at least according to his preconceptions, was that the outside climate was indeed equatorially *hot*. He had been too preoccupied with strangling to pay much attention to the temperature in his one venture into the outside air; but now, as he pressed his palm against the car window, the heat stung his flesh.

He caught the eye of the robot driver, peering back at him in the rear-view mirror. The creature smiled and touched its cap. "Pretty bad right around here, Mr. Michael," it said. "But we won't have to go out into it."

Michael studied him with some distaste. This fad of building machines to look like human beings would never catch on in civilization; why, you

never knew what you were talking to! "We're all right unless the car breaks down, I guess," he grumbled.

"It won't break down, Mr. Michael! I maintain it myself. And anyway, if it did, why, I'd just whistle up a new one from the garage. One'd be here in ten minutes, outside — long before the air-conditioning wore off in here. Or else," he explained, making Michael nervous by half-turning his head as he spoke, "we could just hitch a ride — plenty of traffic along here, these days!"

And indeed there was. The road from the spaceport was twelve lanes wide, and all of them were full. If it had not been so very ugly, it would have been fascinating. Great tractor-trailers rumbled by in both directions. Most of them were cargo trucks, or flatbeds with great, dark, tropic-looking logs going somewhere, or heaped farm produce of some kind going somewhere else. A few of the giants were flatbeds with a difference: rows of seats bolted to the bed, open to the filthy, poisoned air — and occupied by passengers! In that muck! The passengers could not be human, Michael decided. They had to be robots, which would take no harm from the orange flakes of ash, or the Foehn winds, or the air's content of droplets of acid. But it was difficult to believe that when you looked at them. Now and then a smaller vehicle, like the one Michael himself was in, zipped in and out of the plunging procession of huger machines. Through the windows Michael got an occasional glimpse of what were probably real flesh-and-blood human beings like himself. Or thought he did. How could you tell? They paid no attention to him; and, by and by, he paid no attention to them. All his rubbernecking was saved for the scenery. Here and there along the highway, kilometers apart, were occasional cloudy bubbles of some sort of plastic, skyscraper high. They were not easy to see into; but, craning his neck, Michael caught glimpses of, yes, tall trees and dangling vines — were they nature preserves of some sort, keeping a few tiny oases of the original jungle like a museum? Was this what all this terrain had once looked like?

If so, it looked that way no more. What it looked like combined the worst features of an Iowa farmscape, a car factory, and the Los Angeles freeways. Great machines chugged along the fields, planting and plowing, sowing and harvesting. For two kilometers at a stretch it was some sort of tuber that was being dug out of the ground and dropped into waiting trucks, to join the traffic on the road. For another stretch the fields were flooded and the crop might possibly, Michael guessed, be rice. Behind and among the fields were immense sooty industrial buildings. Most of them were topped with immense stacks, and every one of the stacks was pouring more filth into the already corrupted air. "What the Hell are they doing there, Gideon?" Michael called, leaning forward, his eyes on the smoldering stacks.

The robot looked around. Since Michael was not used to robots in

human form, he was astonished to see how much expression they could show on their mechanical faces. He did not have a name for the driver's present look, although his ancestors could have identified it: it was the look of the city man to the rube, amusement and faint contempt. "They make electric power, Mr. Michael," the driver said, politely enough. "See, they harvest the BTU bushes and all the other energy crops, and then they burn them for power.

"Oh, no," Michael cried violently, shaking his head. "I know better than that, at least!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"They can't be burning organic matter! Why, you might as well tell me they're burning fossil fuels. It's all fusion power now. It's been nothing but clean nuclear fusion, for hundreds of years!"

The driver turned back to his wheel. After a moment, he said over his shoulder, "You've been away too long, Mr. Michael." He was smiling.

Their destination turned out to be a huge old building, tall and almost majestic in the sooty air. At first Michael thought it might have been some kind of palace; then, as the car turned toward the ramp to the basement garage, he caught sight of a cracked neon sign. It said **Trinidad Intercontinental**.

It was a hotel! And a big, obviously once expensive one; therefore a tourist one; and for a fleeting moment Michael had the sensation of having come back home. The scene was familiar to him from a million old video films: The Jet Set. The idle rich. The suave, sophisticated international playboys and their dazzling debts — no, they didn't call them "debts," in the movies. Michael knew what he would find inside — a gambling casino; swimming pools; nightclubs; bars with languorous women and deft bartenders; a great restaurant, of course, with vaulted ceilings, and headwaiters who snapped their fingers and ordered special tables set up and chairs brought. . . . So few of those things existed in orbit!

Nor, he discovered, did all of them exist at the Trinidad Intercontinental. Not any more, if they ever had. Through the lobby window, as they came up on a great, slow escalator, he could see that the outdoor swimming pool had become a parts shed, and the ocean view was repellent. There was a beach, all right. But the waves came in like gloppy oil slicks, and strange things floated on them. "This way, Mr. Michael," said his robot chauffeur, leading him to an elevator. Michael might have asked questions; but the sudden sensation of doubled weight as the car leaped up toward the twenty-fifth floor nearly cost him the lunch that, he remembered, he had not had. When they got out he was reeling. "You'll be all right in a minute," the robot told him, and opened a door. "Here's your brother."

It was as well the robot said it — or almost; Rodney looked at Michael for a long moment, then did a most uncharacteristic thing. He got up, came to the door, and put his arms around Michael.

If Michael had been hugged by his brother, ever, it must have been before he was old enough to talk. Certainly before he was old enough to remember. He allowed himself to be squeezed for a moment and then, trying not to give offense, broke free. "I'm glad to see you, too, Rodney," he said; "but honestly, you know, I'm starving."

Rodney looked abashed. "Of course you are," he cried. "I'm sorry. Gideon, will you —?"

"Sure I will, Mr. Rodney," the robot said, and went into another room to use the room-service phone.

Michael sat down on a shabby couch, much too deep for this intense gravity but a lot better than staying on his protesting feet. He regarded his brother. "That's very nice of you, Rodney," he said. "Why are you being so nice?"

Rodney didn't answer him at once. His expression was odd, but almost familiar to Michael. As Rodney moved over to the window and gazed out at the busy farm scene beyond Michael identified it. It was the same look he had seen on Rodney's face when they were children — specifically, when Rodney knew something Michael had not yet been told. Generally something about some trouble Michael was in. "And you called me," Michael remembered, "and then when I called back you were gone. What did you call about?"

Rodney shrugged. "Well, that's the whole thing," he remarked. "How do I explain it to you?"

"Maybe you start by answering the question?"

"What I called about? Sure. I wanted to ask you to help me with a Noyman."

Of all the answers Rodney might have given, there was none that could have surprised Michael more. "A buck! Rodney! You haven't come over to the sporting life, have you?"

"My God, no!"

"Well then?"

Rodney picked his words with care. "It was a special kind of a Noyman, Michael."

Michael stared at him. "The rogue? The one I blew up?"

"That's the one," Rodney said bitterly. "You don't know how lucky you were!"

"Well, sure I do — if somebody hadn't picked me up —"

"I don't mean that. That was just Ann, keeping an eye on you. I mean the buck itself. It was a tritium-seeking Noyman, Michael. There was at least a chance that the whole thing would go up when you speared it — a nuclear explosion!"

"A nuclear —"

"You heard me! And that was my Noyman, Michael; I've been waiting a year for one to show up, and I needed it!"

Michael felt as though he were at the heart of a giant jigsaw puzzle, with pieces dropping into place around him, others missing, some apparently from another puzzle entirely. What Rodney told him made some answers clear. He knew what a tritium-seeking Noyman was; they were rare, like all the special-purpose Noymans; but they did exist, roaming the far stretches of the solar system for rare elements and keyed to return only to specially coded signals. What anyone wanted tritium for was another question entirely. Certainly no normal person had any use for it in his habitat! It had to do with releasing fusion power, of course; and it was terribly dangerous, also of course; and there seemed to be a sort of need for it in some of the automatic industrial systems . . . all that of course; but what would any *person* want with it?

So that particular answer only generated a new question, and there were plenty of those already. What made Rodney think the buck was his? Bucks belonged to no one until they were caught; everyone knew that; it was like saying it was "his" space or "his" starlight. And why was Ann keeping an eye on him? And what kind of help had Rodney wanted? And what could Rodney possibly "need" the buck for? And —

And the more Rodney talked, the cloudier the answers got. Rodney wasn't unresponsive. God, no! He talked non-stop, while the robot room waiters came in with Michael's dinner, silver-topped dishes, and cut crystalware — almost the way it was in those old video films, except that in the films you didn't have an older brother lecturing you all through the process. "Do you know," Rodney demanded, "what your energy budget is?" And then he answered himself. "No, of course you don't. Why would you care? But I measured your habitat's consumption for a solid month."

"Rodney," said Michael, as kindly as he could, "what a dumb thing to do. Not to say sneaky."

"It's not a secret, after all. It's of the order of six hundred kilowatt-years a year. A steady drain of six hundred thousand watts, day in and day out! Just one habitat! Times the one point six million habitats in cislunar orbit, plus the oneills, plus —"

"Energy is civilization," Michael said mildly, investigating what was under the silver covers. It appeared to be ham sandwiches, and the bread was nearly stale.

"You never would listen to anything serious," Rodney said bitterly.

That was true enough. Michael studied his brother, as he chewed on the stringy meat in the sandwich. He noticed that Rodney's beard was turning gray. Not neatly, attractively gray; it was a mixture of natural brown and dirty white. What it looked like most was some old dishcloth

that you could never wash the stains out of. And it wasn't even trimmed. Nor was Rodney's hair. It was thinning at the top and shaggy around the neck. "I get tired of listening to you being serious," Michael said. "Maybe if you ever talked about anything else —"

"I bet you don't even know where the power comes from!"

Michael sighed, and started on the second sandwich. He hadn't returned Rodney's call very happily just because their encounters were always about like this. He didn't like talking to his brother. He hadn't liked his brother all that much even when they were children. Rodney was older, and Rodney was always wiser. Or said he was and reliably came up with reasons why everything Michael said or did on his own was frivolous, dangerous, and stupid . . . some relationships never change. "Of course I know that," he said. "From the power satellites."

"And where do the power satellites get it?"

Michael swallowed the dry mouthful and hastily took a sip of a rather poor wine. "Oh —" He thought for a moment. "All different places, I guess. There's solar power, and what-you-calls, magnetohydrodynamic generators. You can't expect me to remember all that stuff."

Rodney gestured at the purgatory outside the window. "It comes from there!" he shouted triumphantly. "Eighty percent of the power consumed in orbit comes right from the surface of the Earth!"

Michael frowned. It was a silly thing to get excited about, but he was nearly sure his brother was wrong. "No," he said, trying to remember, "I think the way it was, the original habitat program was started to serve the orbiting generators. Yes. They produced energy in space and microwaved it to the Earth, not the other way around, Rodney."

"Right! Until the population balance shifted to space! All those rec-tennae, all those microwave links — the traffic has been going the other way for fifty years now."

"Really?" That was quite surprising, Michael admitted to himself, even if not very important.

"Really! And it has ruined the Earth."

"Well, I'll agree to that." Michael smiled, turning over more silver covers to see what they had given him for dessert. No argument there! You only had to look out the window for the proof. "In fact," he said, poking at what looked like a piece of apple pie with his fork, "that's one of the things I wanted to say, Rodney. I really hate this place. I'd like to catch the next shuttle back to orbit." He was frowning, because the pie did not seem much fresher than the bread in the sandwiches, and there wasn't even any ice cream on it.

He was chewing on the first forkful of the soggy pastry before he realized that his brother wasn't responding to him, and there was something strained about the silence. He looked up, frowning. "What's the matter, Rodney?" he demanded.

"I'm afraid you can't do that," his brother said slowly.

"What are you talking about? Of course I can! There's a ship coming in a week or so, I know that — although I'd hope to get away earlier —"

"Not earlier," said his brother, "and not then. I don't want you talking to people in orbit about this."

Michael put down his fork, forgetting to chew. "How silly you are, Rodney!"

"We don't agree on that," his brother observed. "Anyway, you're going to stay here for a while. Until I finish what I set out to do. What do you think I wanted that tritium-seeker for?"

"God knows! Something obnoxious!"

"No. Something vitally necessary. I was going to use it to make nuclear bombs, Michael. Well, I can't do that, so I'll have to rely on chemical explosives. It will take longer, but I can manage."

"Explosives! You're going to blow something up?"

"A lot of somethings, Michael. I'm going to break the link between Earth and orbit. I'm going to destroy the generators."

Michael gazed at his brother in horror. "All of them?"

"Every one that transmits power to orbit," Rodney declared. "I'll cut off the roots, and the fruit will wither and fall away."

The pie had no more interest for Michael. He put down his fork and took a deep swallow of the wine, his mind filling with images. None of them were adequate. If some 19th-century Irish farmhand had announced his intention of sowing potato bugs in every plowed field — If a slave-state governor had pronounced his own Emancipation Proclamation — If Augustus had disbanded the Roman legions, or Louis the Fourteenth declared France a republic . . . if any human being had ever calmly proposed to do the thing that would demolish the social structure of his homeland entirely, then there might have been some wickedness to match what Rodney proposed. But there was nothing like it in all of human history! Destroy the source of power for the habitats? "Rodney," Michael cried, when he could speak again at all, "we'll *die*!"

"How dramatic you are, Michael," said his brother with irritation. "Don't be foolish. Of course you won't die. There are still generators in orbit. They can supply the oneills —"

"Oneills! Orbiting tenements!"

Rodney shrugged. "Still, they can hold all you smallholders easily enough. Perhaps it won't be comfortable, especially —"

He paused, and Michael finished the sentence for him. "Especially for the brother of a traitor, you mean?"

"Well, I suppose some people might take that view," Rodney muttered. There was a queer sort of apprehension in the way he looked at his brother. Almost fear, Michael thought, and realized that he was standing

up, leaning toward Rodney; he could easily be giving the impression of rage. The thought rather pleased him. All their physical encounters had taken place when Rodney had an eight-year advantage in size and strength. Since they were both grown up, the quarrels had been only verbal.

"I ought to punch you out," he yelled experimentally.

His diagnosis was confirmed. Rodney licked his lips and glanced worriedly at the robot, standing motionless by the door. "We can be reasonable about this, I hope," Rodney offered. "Have some more wine. Sit down. Please."

Michael turned his furious gaze at the robot, moving forward with the bottle. "Wine! Do you think that will fix everything up? — Just a little drop, then," he added, watching Gideon pour.

"I'm willing to listen to reason," Rodney said persuasively. "In the long run, I'm doing this for everyone's best interests."

"Hah!"

"I am! I wouldn't be talking to you like this if I didn't want to have your friendship, would I? I mean, Michael, obviously you're a wastrel and a jock and an idiot. But you're my brother, and I'd rather have you with me than against me. That's why I let Ann talk me into asking for your help with the Noyman."

"Ann!"

"Well, she made sense. And don't forget, if she hadn't been right there at the shuttle, keeping an eye on you, you might be dead now."

"Dead!" Michael said scornfully.

Rodney sighed. "These one-word responses of yours," he said, "get monotonous. Can't you see that the Earth is our real home? It gives us shelter and food, even the wine you drink —"

Michael sneered. "If you're talking about this stuff, it tastes like medicine. They grow better wine on the oneills."

"Because we've ruined the planet! But we can make it well again. Green fields and forests! Paradise! And the first step is to end the export of the Earth's power to space!"

Michael shook his head, wearily holding his glass out for another refill. "You're crazy, Rodney; they won't let you."

"Who won't let me?" his brother demanded triumphantly.

Michael thought that over, swallowing his wine. It was actually quite a hard question. Who was the 'they'? Police? There didn't seem to be any. An army? The last army had been disbanded about the time Michael was being toilet trained. He said lamely, "Nobody will," and sat back down, suddenly feeling very tired.

He was surprised to see, through queerly bleary eyes, that his brother was grinning at him. "You know what I think, bro? I think you need to go to sleep. Gideon, why don't you just take Mr. Michael in the other room

and tuck him in bed?"

"I don't need any help," Michael began thickly, and then realized with surprise it was untrue. He jerked his head up, glaring at his brother. "You put something in the wine!" he snarled.

"Just a little tranquilizer," Rodney soothed, "to help you to your well earned rest . . . and to keep you out of my way while I get on with my work. Pleasant dreams," Michael heard, and then heard nothing at all.

There are times when even someone accustomed to being an absolute monarch has something to dream about. Michael did dream. He dreamed he was back in his snug little habitat, with his familiar servants and his deb list and his trophy wall. He dreamed, in fact, that nothing had changed. When he woke he was terribly disappointed. No friendly bed-straps to hold him close, no bedside table to greet him with juice and coffee. He was crushed down onto a huge, gross mattress, and instead of his pretty view-screens there was nothing to look at but a great hot window, giving out on the ugly, oily sea. Those nightmare memories of the day before — they were real!

"Good morning, Mr. Michael," said the pleasant baritone voice of the robot, Gideon, as it sprang to life from its position against the wall. "I hope you slept well. Would you like breakfast?"

Michael sat up — not easily; he had to help himself with his arms, and his whole body felt sore from the night-long drag of gravity while he slept. "What I would like," he said, "is to go home. Right away."

The robot pursed its lips in a very human expression of concern. It was very human looking in almost all ways, as a matter of fact. Sandy hair, an alert, intelligent face; if Michael had not been told he would not have guessed it was mechanical. "I wish I could help you," it said regretfully. "There's a message from your brother you might like to hear — shall I play it for you?"

Michael grunted as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and turned toward the window. "Not there, Mr. Michael," the robot said. "On the monitor."

How queer! Apparently they didn't have view walls at all in this place. What Gideon was indicating was a small screen on a desk, and as the robot touched a control it sprang into light. Rodney's face looked out. "Sorry about knocking you out, Michael," it said, "but I think you're stronger than I am now, and I didn't want you to interfere. I've gone to work on the project. Gideon will take care of you until I get back, and meanwhile you can enjoy all the facilities of the hotel. Also, Gideon will be glad to educate you, so you won't be bored. Of course, you can't leave. So just relax and enjoy it."

The screen winked off. Michael looked sourly around the bedroom.

Enjoy it! The place was interesting, in a way, as anything may be interesting if it is quaint enough. Michael was not a quaintness fancier. He stood up and faced the robot. "Take me back to the spaceport now," he ordered.

"Oh, but there's no point in that, Mr. Michael. There's no ship leaving for quite some time."

"Then to some other spaceport! Somewhere there has to be one."

The robot looked regretful. "I'm afraid I can't. Mr. Rodney's orders."

"Then call me a taxi!" The robot shook its head. In mounting anger, Michael snapped, "Then I'll walk, damn it!"

"But you can't do that, Mr. Michael," the robot said reasonably. "I'm afraid you'd die out there without a thermal suit and a helmet. The climate is quite adverse to flesh and blood beings in these latitudes."

"Then —"

"And I can't get you a helmet, either," Gideon apologized, forestalling him, "because Mr. Rodney left strict instructions about that, too." The robot paused, then added, "And in case you are thinking of asking someone for help, there are no humans but you in the hotel, and all the communications are monitored. Nothing goes out of here without looping through Mr. Rodney's communications systems, and I'm quite sure he will not forward any outside calls for you." The robot's expression was sympathetic but firm as he added, "And now, would you like some breakfast?"

If one must be a prisoner, a prison that was once a luxury hotel is not a bad place to be. The kitchen had fallen terribly from whatever its standards once had been. The night club had only robot shows, and only robots in the audience, for that matter, not counting Michael himself; and he was pretty sure that when he wasn't present there was no show. Or audience, for that matter. Yet the casinos still operated — again with robots on both sides of the table — and the swimming pool was a delight. If you had to be on the surface of the Earth, a pool was a big asset; the buoyancy of the water relieved much of the 1-G drag. Gideon accompanied him everywhere, even to the pool — though not in it, since robots don't swim. Michael wondered idly what would happen if he had a sudden cramp in the deep end, and the robot reassured him. "Oh, I'd get you out, Mr. Michael — I'm waterproof. But, as I'm too dense to float, I'd have to walk along the bottom to get to you. Would you care to start your training now?"

"I don't need to be trained by a robot!" Michael snapped.

"An unfortunate choice of words. I only meant that Mr. Rodney suggested I should brief you on the data underlying his decision."

"That's a stupid idea if I ever heard one," Michael announced, but after not very many hours he was running out of smart ones. It had been

pleasant enough to buy new clothes in the hotel's shops, interesting to soak in the sauna and almost fun — slightly more pleasure than pain, anyway — to try to play on the hotel's indoor miniature golf course, although that was not a game you could play very well in orbit, and thus not suitable for real human beings. He shrugged.

That was enough. The robot led him to a room that had once been set up for meetings, provided him with something to eat and something to drink, sat him in a reasonably comfortable chair, and said, "The first thing, Mr. Michael, is to show the basics of power supply to orbit." And he darkened the room, and pictures sprang up on an almost decently large screen on the stage.

Michael would not have imagined this to be an interesting subject, but as the documentary progressed he found himself paying attention. It had been assembled with some care, for what purpose he could not imagine, out of old film clips and live-action shots, animation, and diagrams, with a voice-over commentary that sounded like his brother.

What it said was not altogether pleasant. The drain of electric power to the orbiting habitats had meant that the whole planet Earth had become a power source for the people whose lives were spent circling it. Fusion power? Of course there was fusion power, the narration said. But there was a limit to how much fusion-power generation the ecology would tolerate.

Ecology! Michael snorted. One of Rodney's favorite words. And that couldn't be true, because everybody knew the supply of deuterium in the Earth's oceans was all but inexhaustible — The deuterium (the narration continued) was all but inexhaustible, but fusion power is intrinsically inefficient. The temperatures involved are star-high. The rejected heat from a fusion generator exceeded that from even an old-fashioned uranium-fission plant (already terribly inefficient) by orders of magnitude. And, as the load curve climbed, the power engineers discovered they were cooking their planet.

"This curve," said the narrator — now Michael was sure it was his brother — "shows the rise in sea level since 1895." A red arrow traced a course across the screen. "It was about a millimeter a year for the first fifty years or so. Then it went to three millimeters a year. Now it is running over forty millimeters a year. The ice-caps are melting, but that's only part of it. Most of the rise is simple thermal expansion of the oceans as they grow warmer. So far more than eighteen hundred charted islands have simply disappeared, and the coasts of every continent are getting wet."

"I didn't know Rodney knew all that," said Michael, impressed.

"I helped him with the data," Gideon offered shyly. "That's my specialty."

"Huh." It had never occurred to Michael that robots could do that sort

of thing. Could his own servants handle that? Would it be possible, he daydreamed, to input into, say, his message center all the known data about Noymans and their habits, and have them advise him by radio during a hunt? If so, would that be sportsmanlike? If not, would it be found out?

A searing desert scene on the screen brought him back to the documentary. Apparently hot winds were ripping at the Earth. Rising temperatures, his brother droned on, had not meant warming the polar regions as much as it had meant a pestilence of hot, dry sirocco winds across the temperate zones — the breadbaskets of the world. The atmosphere, after all, is a heat engine. The more heat goes into it, the more kinetic energy it produces — in the form of winds, hurricanes, tornados . . . siroccos.

And all that had happened, Michael learned, even after the power combines in desperation had halted the building of new fusion generators. A point of no return had been reached. The best they could do was to try to keep it from getting worse — or anyway, much worse — or, at least, very rapidly worse. They met the energy demand with every sort of production scheme mankind or man's servants could imagine. Biomass was a major factor. The plantations he had seen along the road did not produce food. They produced fuel, just as Gideon had said. The beet roots and taro and sugar cane they grew went into the alcohol stills, and the alcohol, along with the residues, were fuel. There wasn't that much need for food on Earth, any more, and anyway most of the agricultural products were only marginally edible. They were grown in salt-water irrigation. They were salty.

And all the generators fed the rectennae that hurled power to the satellites in orbit. And it was not enough.

So a thousand other systems were put to work to produce electrical energy. Some of them were so old as to be traditional, like hydroelectric power; some were even older, so that they had not been used for generations, like windmills. The magma under the crust gave up geothermal heat. The tides and the waves were harnessed. The Gulf Stream had been dammed; and great, slow rotors off the sunken coasts of Florida and the Carolinas sucked out its energy to make more electricity. The coal mines and the shale pits and the natural-gas bubbles and the tar sands were all being burned. That was where the filth in the air came from. It would have been possible to install anti-pollution devices, but each one laid a tax on the energy generated. Robots could stand the pollution. They didn't breathe; didn't have a sense of smell, unless they desired one; could not be poisoned by NOx or SO₂. And there were not many humans left to suffer, and those there were simply wore masks. But the anti-pollution equipment was unused, because the energy was more valuable than the air.

Some of the devices for wringing the last erg out of the bleeding Earth fascinated Michael, because he had never heard of such things. An ice

generator, for instance? Michael knew that water expanded when it froze — that was why ice-cubes floated in a drink. He even knew, if he had troubled to remember it, that there were many places on the Earth, even now, where the temperature hovered around the freezing mark — far north and far south, or high on mountains — and so water would freeze and melt, freeze and melt over and over again. It amused him that someone had thought to install great sealed tanks in such places, so that the water froze by night and expanded, melted with the morning sun and shrank again — and that squeeze and relaxation pressed pistons that turned gears that drove generators for more energy. Osmotic pumps exploited the salinity of the sea for power . . . the list seemed to go on forever!

And it all went into space.

And Michael was fascinated. "Incredible!" he murmured aloud, as the documentary finished itself at last. "I wouldn't have believed it."

The robot beamed at him as it turned up the room lights and opened the door. "Mr. Rodney wasn't sure you'd understand," it said, "but I was sure that any reasoning being would draw inescapable conclusions, once he had the data."

"I couldn't agree more," Michael cried. "What a triumph! So much skill and intelligence devoted to such a grand purpose — the liberation of the human race from the tyranny of its mother planet!"

Even a luxury hotel becomes boring. Even gambling lost its charm, especially when it did not matter to Michael whether he won or lost . . . especially when he began noticing that the robot who impassively shoved heaps of chips onto *impair* and *rouge* at the roulette table was also the towel boy in the hotel's sauna, and the chambermaid who made his bed in the morning turned up singing in the rooftop cafe that night. Why, the whole thing was a fraud, Michael thought as he mooned grouchily around the great building, mourning his missing wall pictures and friendly, always-obedient household utensils. Not that Gideon and the others were disobedient in the least. It was simply that they were obeying the first orders they had received, which happened to come from his brother. "Why do you do it?" Michael demanded, confronting Gideon.

"It is what we were made to do," the robot explained.

"But it's silly! Running this whole hotel just to entertain me!" The robot smiled and shrugged. "And anyway, what's going to happen to you if my crazy brother blows up the power plants?"

"Why, nothing, I guess, Mr. Michael."

"You'll die without power, won't you?"

"Oh, no. He's only going after the big ones. There'll be enough left — we don't draw much energy for ourselves, you know."

The creatures were absolutely frustrating! How could they be so

disinterested? "You don't care that Rodney's going to try to get human beings to move back onto the Earth?"

The robot looked thoughtful, but said only, "We won't interfere."

"Not even to save human beings a lot of discomfort — all those people who'll have to move into oneills?"

"I think," said the robot, "that we can stand seeing a lot of human beings experiencing some discomfort."

Michael studied him narrowly, but the robot returned his look mildly enough. Michael sighed. "It'll never work anyhow," he observed. "Who would want to live on this lousy planet?"

"As to that," Gideon volunteered, "I can tell you what Mr. Rodney has in mind if you like. Shall I?" It took Michael's resigned shrug as approval, and turned away to do something Michael could not quite follow inside its loosely fitting jacket. "Ah, yes," it said, "Mr. Rodney's plan seems quite feasible. Perhaps you know, Mr. Michael, that at one time most human beings expected to colonize the others planets in this solar system."

"Live on *planets*?" Michael demanded incredulously. "Those lousy things? Instead of habitats?"

"They had not yet developed the concept of the orbiting habitat, Mr. Michael. And at that time the physical conditions of the planets were not well known. When they discovered that all of them were too hot or too cold, with too much atmosphere or too little, or none at all, they developed some ingenious schemes. They called them 'terraforming'."

"I never heard of 'terraforming'."

"No, I suppose not," the robot agreed gravely. "The precise procedures would, I think, be somewhat tedious to listen to —"

"Just the outlines," Michael snapped.

"Yes, of course. Put simply, terraforming would add air and water to Mars by arranging to melt its polar ice cap, and would reduce the pressure and improve the constituents of Venus's atmosphere by seeding it with special organisms. Well, Mr. Rodney has similar plans for the Earth. It is quite probable they would work. In a few decades, human beings would be able to live on the Earth again, without protective equipment."

Michael shook his head in revulsion. "What a ghastly idea. Tell me something. How come you know so much about all this?"

"I beg your pardon?" The robot did not seem to grasp the question.

"How," Michael spelled it out, "do . . . you . . . know . . . all . . . this?"

"Oh, of course, Mr. Michael," the robot said in an apologetic tone. "I forgot you had very little to do with us, so you would not know about our chip storage." He opened his jacket and revealed a garment like vest, with hundreds of small pockets. "These are specialized memory stores, Mr. Michael. We simply plug in whatever data we need for any purpose — of course, this is only a small sample of the available material. Just what I

thought might be needed. But of course if I need to know any other subject I can have the data transmitted from the central files onto a blank chip." He reached inside himself, and from a slot between what would have been his second and third ribs if he had had any pulled out a tapered black thing shaped like a guitar pick. "This one is on ecological engineering, as we were just discussing. This other one —" he indicated a pocket — "is on power-plant construction and maintenance, this one on vehicle operation, this one on rocket navigation —"

Michael touched the pointed black thing curiously. "Interesting," he commented. "And if you were to plug in, say, the one on rocket navigation, you could tell me anything I wanted to know about it?"

"Almost anything, yes, Mr. Michael. Not just tell you. I have full projection equipment available as well, so I could show you graphs, pictures, diagrams, and so on."

Michael walked over to the window, looking out at the garbagey Hell his brother was proposing to make the home of the human race again. "You know, Gideon," he said thoughtfully, "I think I'd like you to order me up something to eat — a sandwich, and a couple of bottles of beer ought to be about right. And then, what I'd like, I'd like you to tell me what all those different chips are about."

When Rodney came back Michael was waiting for him. "Bro," he said, "you've got the right idea. Let me help you."

Rodney stopped in the doorway, staring at him. He had been gone only days, but he looked as though it had been hard time. His chin, always blue, was stubbled; his eyes were dull and fatigued. "Fly that past me again," he said.

"I don't blame you if you don't believe me," said Michael, "but that's the way it is. Gideon has been educating me."

His brother glanced at the robot, poised motionless by the great, hot picture windows. "Bring me a beer," he ordered, and Gideon responded instantly. Rodney sat down, accepted the tall flagon from the robot and waited for his brother to speak.

"What you're doing," said Michael, "is shock treatment, and it's going to create a lot of hardship, but I believe you're right. In your objectives, anyway. In the way you're going about it, all wrong." Rodney raised his eyebrows but didn't speak. "There are," Michael continued, "twenty-two thousand three hundred and fifty-three power generating stations now feeding juice into the microwave transmitters to feed the power satellites. You've been out planting bombs in some of them — how many?"

Rodney scowled at the robot. "How did you know I was planting bombs?" he demanded.

"Don't worry, Gideon didn't tell me that. It was obvious. Anyway, I

would estimate you've managed to plant twenty-five at the outside, right?" Rodney shrugged. "A lot less, then. So at your present rate of progress you might get the job done in ten years or so — maybe — and there's no use in that, because you can't keep it a secret that long. The people in orbit will find out what you're doing and stop it."

"They won't!"

"They will, Rodney; and in any case that's silly. You don't have to blow up twenty thousand transmitters. They all feed into the same three hundred or so power satellites in orbit. Blow the satellites up!"

Rodney drained the last of his beer in a sulky manner and tossed the flagon to the robot, who caught it handily, refilled it, and returned it to the human. "Give me some credit, Michael. I thought of that. I can't do it — they're too exposed. Some dumb hunt party would blunder along just when we were setting the charges."

"No, they w—"

"Yes they would, Michael, so shut up for a minute and listen to me." He kicked off his shoes and massaged his feet as he talked; evidently he had had a hard time in the last few days. "Let's say you're really convinced it's the right thing and you're willing to help. That makes two of us. Ann makes three. There are about four others I can count on — maybe — so we're up to seven. Now, in order to lift and set explosive charges in three hundred power satellites —"

"But you don't have to —"

"I said shut up, Michael! We just don't have the manpower to do the job, and there's no chance of getting more. Ann and I even tried talking to the sailship people."

"Those idiots!" Michael scoffed, and his brother glared at him.

"They aren't idiots, they're just going about it the wrong way. What they want is a decent planet to walk around on, and they think they'll find one in some other solar system. That means maybe forty years in the deep sleep, and God knows how much more time if the first planet doesn't work out — which it won't — and that's stupid, I agree. But they're not stupid people. They simply wouldn't see that it was faster and better to fix up the Earth. And without them, or without some other help from somewhere, we can't do much about the power satellites; they're too exposed. We'd be caught surely. The Earth stations take a lot longer, but who ever bothers to look at them? So sooner or later I'll get them all set up and then, boom, it's all over."

Michael signaled to the robot for a beer of his own. "Are you quite finished now?" he asked his brother politely.

"I guess so."

"Yes, well, then let me tell you where you're wrong. You don't have to blow up three hundred separate power satellites. One big bomb will do it."

"You're crazy! You can't even *feel* a bomb blast in space more than a dozen meters away —"

"Not blast," said Michael merrily, sipping his beer. "The significant effect is radiation. What is called the electromagnetic pulse, or EMP for short. It amounts to about a million volts per meter, anywhere within a hundred thousand kilometers; and that is enough to fry the control systems on every power satellite in orbit. The rectennae will still be there. But they won't be able to transmit. They will be out of operation until all their transistors and control chips are replaced and debugged — a year's work at least."

Rodney was staring at him with his mouth open. Then he turned to the robot. "Gideon! You've been educating him!"

"Yes, Mr. Rodney. You instructed me to."

"So you see," said Michael, "there's your problem solved for you. I think we can still find that tritium pig. According to Gideon, although there's no ship from the nearest launch port for a couple of weeks there are others from other places we can get to. All we have to do is get started, bro . . . so what do you say?"

Rodney stared at him over the rim of the flask as he took another deep draught of the beer. Then, suddenly, he grinned and thrust out his hand.

"I say we get started," he cried. "After all, if I can't trust my own brother, who can I trust?"

Gideon's information was accurate: there was a ship; they flew to it in less than an hour, and three hours later they were strapped in for liftoff. Rodney was in high spirits, and Michael very supportive. They transhipped in low-Earth orbit to a two-passenger taxi, and in less than twelve hours they were in Michael's dear familiar habitat. The appliances were delighted to see their master back again and quickly prepared them a meal and drinks, according to Michael's instructions. Then the brothers called up Ann Oberhauser, startling her a great deal; arranged to see her as soon as they could get there; had another drink to toast their coming triumph; and then there was Michael again, spurring his trusty steed through the beautiful cold freedom of space, with his brother strapped on the jump seat behind him. "Isn't it beautiful, Rodney?" Michael demanded, gazing around at the stars, diamond-bright and ruby-hot, and the incredibly majestic rusty-brown Moon, like a sunburst filtered through a film of brass. "Some people might have bad things to say about this," he added, "but I know it's the right thing to do." His brother, leaning heavily up against his back as the steed surged and bucked under Michael's spur, did not reply; and Michael sang to himself as they rushed past habitats and the beacons of other travelers, with the broad Earth's night side always below.

And then they were coming up on Ann's habitat. It was smaller than his own. It looked like a brown-shelled egg rather than a hand-grenade, and the entry port was waiting open for him. He lashed the steed in its rack, patted Rodney's space-suited shoulder, and squeezed through the narrow entrance.

Ann was waiting for him, half apprehensive, half sweetly expectant. "Now what is this, Michael?" she demanded, pretty in her metal body suit. "You two woke me up!"

"Sorry about that," said Michael cheerfully, glancing about as he slipped his helmet off. No one else was there. He had thought, not very happily, that Ann might easily have taken another dude in his absence — there was plenty of time, certainly! And that would have been a blow, but it hadn't happened.

"Well?" she demanded. "You've got me out of bed; you made me suit up; I'm waiting to hear what it's all about."

"Sorry to be so mysterious," he grinned, fumbling in his pouch and producing a couple of bulbs. "but there are some things it's better not to talk about on the phone. Drink up! A stirrup cup, made by the best wet bar in orbit, to toast the salvation of humanity!"

She looked quizzical at the grandiosity of his remark, but returned his smile. He downed his bulb with a flourish and she sipped at hers, her eyes kindly but perplexed. "Good stuff," she admitted, which it was — Michael's private mixture, somewhere between shandygaff and a mint julep. "But where's Rodney, then?"

"Out on my steed, waiting for us." He nodded toward the viewscreen. The mount rack was visible, with Rodney's suited form just in sight in one corner. "Finish your drink and helmet up, Ann; we've got work to do!"

"But —"

"Oh, come on, Ann," he said earnestly; and, half coaxing her, half pushing, he got her to down the stirrup cup, pull the globe over her russet hair, check the seals and report them intact . . . just as she began yawning.

"Sleep well, dear Ann," he murmured as her eyes closed. Although Ann was actually a little bigger than Michael and awkward to move around in her spacesuit, he managed to get her through the lock. Then it was easy to seat her carefully on the fuel tank, just behind his sleeping brother, and lash her to the improvised seat.

He took his own position, belted in, and opened up the main thrusters. Over his shoulder he could see that both of them were secure. He could even make out the peaceful expressions. "Pleasant dreams, dear ones," he said fondly, and set course for the distant shark-fin of white that was the sail of the interstellar vessel.

And the days went by and the weeks, and Michael's life was complete.

There were the hunts and the parties and the systematic exploration of the inexhaustible deb list; and what more could any human being want? Michael didn't dream about his longings any more. Once again his dreams were his real life.

Of course there were questions — not questions so much, because of just who Rodney and Ann were, as little jibes and hints. When his friends talked about the missing brother and the missing ex-consort, their tone was sometimes friendly and sometimes needling. Michael met both kinds of inquiries alike, with polite annoyance at their bad manners. By and by the gossips stopped bothering. Rodney was a known eccentric. Ann had dangerous ideas. If they chose to wander off together, why, so much the worse for them! The only real curiosity was where they had wandered to. Most guessed the surface of the Earth. A few guessed more accurately — though not, Michael was sure, as to the details.

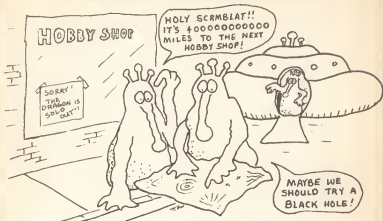
The photon sailship was where they were. The sailship crew had been almost pathetically grateful to accept these last-minute recruits. Perhaps they were surprised that both of them arrived already in deep sleep, for most of the travelers wanted to stay awake at least for the first few weeks of spreading the sails and slowly, s-l-o-w-l-y beginning to accumulate velocity for the endless trip. But they did not press the point, because most of *them* were known eccentrics too. Or else why would they have become sailship volunteers?

And long after the spread wings of the interstellar ship had vanished even from his fair-sized telescope . . . after Ann's and Rodney's names had stopped coming up in chatter, after their habitats had been taken over by new people and their strange ways almost forgotten . . . sometimes Michael, drifting off to sleep in his gentle bed or rummaging through his inventory of debts or arrowing through space in pursuit of the ever scarcer bucks — sometimes Michael would think of them. Never with anger. Sometimes with gentle pity, and even affection. And always with a certain pride. He bore no animus toward them wrong as they were, and dangerous. He had prevented the disaster they wanted to bring about. If he had a real regret it was only that he thought it best not to tell anyone, ever, of how he had personally done the deed that forever safeguarded the Orbital Way.

This is — believe it or not — Frederik Pohl's first story sale to Amazing. His first sale of any kind was a poem, published in the magazine in the late 1930s, but in the intervening years things have not worked out as well as successive editors of Amazing might have hoped. Since then Pohl has become one of the most successful writers and editors in the field. He is author (with Cyril Kornbluth) of the classic, The Space Merchants. Other books include Gateway, Beyond the Blue Event Horizon, BiPohl, Starburst, and The Early Pohl. Forthcoming titles include The Midas World and The Other Side of the Gate.



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